

“An exhilarating adventure on many levels worth reading.”

- Christopher Luzzio, MD, Neurologist,
University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics

“From the taking a single footstep to the climbing of Mt. Kilimanjaro, these stories teach us what it means to lose locomotion and what it feels like to get it back.”

- Erik Belgum, Author of
Star Fiction and Collected Short Stories (SIC)

“This is more than a book about undaunting leadership. It is a book about the beauty of the human spirit. You must read it.”

- Edward Grinnan, Editor-in-Chief, *Guideposts*,
and author of *The Promise of Hope: How True Stories of
Hope and Inspiration Saved My Life and How They Can
Transform Yours.*

“*More than a Mountain* is just that. It leads us to the summit of Kilimanjaro and into the lives of a unique group of people with a common goal. Their individual accounts affirm the truth that mountains are not obstacles in our way but pathways to empowerment. “

- Todd Burleson, President,
Alpine Ascents International

“This book shows the beauty of the mountains—and the daunting challenge they pose. Everybody’s limits are different. This book is a wonderful testimony to mustering courage in the search for those limits, and an inspiration to living a life that is as full as can be. ”

- Peer Baneke, CEO,
Multiple Sclerosis International Federation

"I think of the Chinese proverb, "The person who says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it." Frankly, I wouldn't have thought it was possible for someone with MS to scale Mount Everest, let alone the highest peak on each of the seven continents. Then, Lori Schneider leads fourteen people with MS or Parkinson's up Mount Kilimanjaro. What? The only way I can make sense out of that is to accept that Lori has redefined the word "possible." Without question, these stories will inspire you and leave you in awe of the power and beauty of the human spirit."

- Phil Bolsta, author of *Through God's Eyes: Finding Peace and Purpose in a Troubled World*

"It's a rare individual who has not faced personal tragedy, but it is equally as rare to find one who has come through on the other side a stronger and more complete person. The stories in *More than a Mountain* are of just such individuals, those who pushed beyond the limits of their own strength to overcome the physical and emotional effects of disease, loss, addiction, and other personal pain to forge a new self not defined by their tragedy."

- Mary Stirrat, reporter for The Inter-County Leader

"We all have our mountains to climb; be they literal or figurative ones. *More than a Mountain* is a beautiful telling of how neurological challenges can be faced when patients, loved ones and physicians join together. The healing community that results is extraordinarily powerful."

- James Bowen, MD, Medical Director,
Multiple Sclerosis Center,
Swedish Neuroscience Institute

“Each and every one of the Leap of Faith climbers summited far more than a 19,000’ peak. The intimate stories of determination, fear, and faith shared in *More than a Mountain* are a testament that engaging in life requires a Leap of Faith taken by each climber to define life rather than let a disease or condition define their lives. Whether a physician, seasoned adventurer with MS or a loving spouse of a determined husband with Parkinson’s the Leap of Faith climbers are a keen reminder that actively engaging life is the key to a life well lived and provides the footprints and courage for others to follow. Definitely an inspirational must read!”

- Cheryl Siefert, Executive Director,
Parkinson Association of the Rockies

“No member of this remarkable team should ever think of themselves as “ordinary” again. Each candid account of the challenges overcome to successfully climb Mt. Kilimanjaro is a testament to the extraordinary power of the conscious choice to believe “I CAN!” This book trumps fictional tales of superheroes or adventure any day. It’s a must-read for anyone of any age who either doubts their true potential or desires to achieve it.”

- Michele Hermansen, Photojournalist,
Global Justice Advocate

“I have read all the exciting books by Krauker and Viesturs regarding climbing; *More than a Mountain* can be proudly shelved next to them. The courage, fortitude and persistence of all the climbers underscores their passion for life and for the fighting of disease that is continually trying to rob

them of control. Bigger than the climb and the summit, is that every person, healthy or those fighting a neurological disease, can identify their own mountain and go out and conquer it on a daily basis."

- Dr. Jay L. Alberts,
President and Founder, Pedaling for Parkinsons

"More than a Mountain is more than a collection of climbing stories. A loose knit team of climbers, many with MS and PD took one of life's largest challenges by climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. Their personal stories make you think about your own limitations and what is stopping you from going forward."

- Alan Arnette, Mountaineer,
Alzheimer's Advocate and Speaker

"As you put perceived obstacles behind you, your ascent to fearlessness will be achieved. This book serves as a reminder that anything is possible."

- Stephanie Wautier, RN, BSN, DC

"More than a Mountain is a textbook in life enrichment. It demonstrates the capacity of the human spirit to triumph over the loss experienced with the onset of chronic illness and the ability to find true fulfillment through achieving something extraordinary against the odds. By conquering the physical challenges of Kilimanjaro, Lori and her fellow climbers also conquered their own physical adversities, revealing the importance of inner strength in defining our enjoyment of life. Read and be inspired."

- Tom Isaacs, Co-founder,
The Cure Parkinson's Trust

More than a
MOUNTAIN

Our Leap of Faith

More than a Mountain: Our Leap of Faith

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More than a
MOUNTAIN
Our Leap of Faith

Foreword by Jeff Rennie
Introduction by Lori Schneider

*First-hand Accounts by the Leap of Faith Climbers
Supporting multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease*



Dedication

To all those who are climbing mountains and obstacles in their own lives and those living with multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease.



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Foreword: To Carry the Light

Jeff Rennie

IN THE PREDAWN LIGHT OF JULY 18, 2011, CLIMBERS from the “Leap of Faith Expedition” stood at the summit of 19,340-foot Mount Kilimanjaro. The morning air atop Africa’s highest point was soft blue and cold. As the sun rose that morning, an orange glow illuminated their faces. A sharp wind ripped the tears from their eyes. Down coats and thick mitts muffled the celebratory hugs and high-fives. For most climbers and the majority of expeditions, this would have been the proudest moment, the culmination of years of pre-trip planning and logistics, the months of grueling training hikes, days of burning leg muscles and lung-searing effort of the climb itself. The summit moment is often the single most important reason most climbers climb and the whole purpose of the expedition itself. But not this time. These were not most climbers and Leap of Faith was not one of the majority of expeditions.



On another morning more than a decade earlier, expedition leader Lori Schneider had rolled out of bed to

get on the treadmill, as she did every morning, when she noticed that the left side of her body was tingling, from her foot through her shoulders, half her face, even the left half of her tongue. “It was as if someone had drawn a line down the middle,” she says, “and half of me had gone numb.” At first she suspected a cortisone shot in her foot a few days earlier had hit a nerve, and she assumed the numbness would go away. It didn’t.

Lori called her doctor, touching off a three-month barrage of tests—lupus, Lyme’s disease, MRI’s, and CT Scans. On an around-the-world trip a few years earlier she’d eaten a lot of wild game. “I was pretty relieved when the test for warthog came back negative,” she jokes. But some of the other potential causes were not as humorous. The numbness soon spread to parts of her right side and doctors began to suspect a stroke or brain cancer. Eventually, doctors came to a diagnosis: multiple sclerosis.

Multiple sclerosis (or MS) affects over 2.5 million people worldwide, attacking the central nervous system, causing scarring on the brain, the spinal cord, even the optic nerves. It can result in loss of mobility, loss of vision, as well as cognitive difficulties, even paralysis. Called “thecrippler of young adults” because most of those diagnosed are between the ages of 20 and 50, MS has no cure.

“Those two little letters—MS—sent me into panic mode,” Schneider says. She quit her 20-year career as a school teacher, ended her 22-year marriage, sold her home, and left her community of Steamboat Springs, Colorado. “I acted out of fear,” she says. “I just ran from my whole life.” She ran to the mountains.

“MS carries with it a real stigma,” Schneider says. “I

remember watching those commercials as a kid: ‘MS, thecrippler of young adults.’ My biggest fear was what the MS would do to the person I thought I was. I wanted to be judged by my personal strength and not by the label of this illness. Mountain climbing was a chance to show the world that people with MS can and do achieve things in their lives at, literally, the highest levels.”

She began a quest—to be the first person with MS to stand atop the highest mountain on every continent. One by one, she conquered her fear and climbed. Alaska’s Mount McKinley, Europe’s Mt. Elbrus, Africa’s Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount Vinson in Antarctica, Aconcagua in South America, and others. “As I climbed,” Lori says, “I thought about how many people with MS struggle just to walk across the living room, and here I was climbing mountains. Those were the people who empowered me, who gave me the courage to continue.”

Finally, at 8:39 a.m. Nepal time on May 23, 2009, Lori Schneider became the first person with MS ever to stand atop Mount Everest and the first person with MS in history ever to complete the Seven Summits. On Everest’s summit, she unfurled the World MS flag. “It was so windy I could barely hang on to it,” she says, “but as I held that flag over the summit I thought, what a change in ten years. Here was this person who ten years ago thought her life was ending and now I’m standing literally on top of the world holding a flag that screams ‘I have MS and I’m okay.’”

People ask her what it was like to be on top of the world, but for those ten surreal minutes on the world’s highest summit, Schneider could not see a thing. No view at all, in the middle of the clouds and storm. With no outward view,

all she could see was what was inside of her. “What I saw,” she says, “was a person who had become brave since that terrifying day she woke up numb. I saw a person who was no longer afraid to live life passionately, who took a leap of faith and tried something that once would have scared her to death. I saw a person who had MS and hoped the world would see that those two little letters could also stand for ‘Mostly Strong.’” And, she wanted to help others with MS see that too.

Today, Lori Schneider and her organization, Empowerment Through Adventure, inspires others with potential debilitating diseases to take their own leap of faith, climbing mountains of fear and doubt towards strength and renewal. The 2011 Leap of Faith: Mount Kilimanjaro expedition paired 14 climbers who had either MS or Parkinson’s disease with 14 companion climbers. As with other expeditions, the summit loomed large in the hopes and dreams of the climbers. In the end, 21 of the 28 Leap of Faith team members would indeed make it to the top. But for all the men and woman on this trip, the climb had a higher purpose: to carry the light of hope and a message of strength to the highest reaches of both our planet and the human spirit.

These are their stories—stories of fear and pain, of the courage to dig deep into that well of strength that lies within us all, and the willingness to try and try again, even in the face of insurmountable odds. Here are stories of shared joy and faith, stories of people who are more than climbers, on a climb of a peak that was More than a Mountain, on an expedition that was more than a climbing journey. Here are the stories of a Leap of Faith.

Jeff Rennie, 2011 Leap of Faith: Mount Kilimanjaro Expedition photographer. Jeff Rennie is a nationally-known writer, speaker, and photographer. He is the author of 10 books, including *Treasures of Alaska* published by the National Geographic Society and more than 250 magazine articles. He lives in Bayfield, Wisconsin and acted as the photographer on the “Leap of Faith” expedition. More of his work can be seen at www.jeffrennie.com.



The Dream Begins

*"As we work to create light for others,
we naturally light our own way."
- Mary Anne Radmacher*



Introduction

Lori Schneider

LEAP OF FAITH: IDIOM-AMERICAN HERITAGE Dictionary. "A leap of faith, in its most commonly used meaning, is the act of believing in or accepting something intangible or unprovable. It is an act of complete trust in something that cannot readily be seen."

What does leap of faith mean to me? It is the driving force that possesses us to do something many others think of as foolish, outside of our reach, beyond the limits our labels have set for us, or those we have set in our own minds. It is that belief that we can achieve our goal, even when it is against all odds. It is the desire to try something that we know is probably impossible, but we try anyway. For me, it was attempting something that I never, ever, EVER thought was attainable and saying, "What have I got to lose?" Failure is only in the mind, and so is the ability to dream big.

My big dream started out as an ambition to set foot on each of the seven continents and experience the people, culture, and heartbeat of foreign lands. I began

this dream by saving for a trip to Europe at age 15. I spent that summer living and traveling with a family in Germany and learning to immerse myself in another world. I came to understand that we can learn so much by stepping beyond our comfort level and challenging the mind and spirit. That first trip began a lifelong travel obsession that led me to Iceland, India, Russia, the Great Barrier Reef, the islands of Fiji, the Maldives and the Seychelles, Nepal, Vietnam, and Malaysia, just to name a few of the places. I even visited various countries in Africa during an eleven-week adventure via an overland truck.

In 1978, after graduating from an all women's college in Iowa, I began working as a special education and elementary education teacher in Colorado. My desire to impact children's lives through teaching lasted for 20 years and still continues today, as I encourage children and adults alike to dream big and not be afraid to try.

I have always maintained a strong connection with family and friends, and in 1993 I was inspired by my father's dream to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. This led us to a successful summit of "Kili" on my dad's 61st birthday. He was my inspiration, my friend, and my hero. Six years later a second father-daughter climb of one of the world's highest peaks was set in motion. With a successful millennium summit of Mt. Aconcagua, South America's highest peak, my dream to climb the Seven Summits was born.

My desire to climb intensified in 1999, after my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. Waking up with a body that was half numb, I feared the worst. I felt the panic of needing to complete my chosen task while I was still in control of

my physical body. From that point on, I saved money when and where I could to pursue my passion of climbing. In 2000, I used what I had saved to participate in a climb of Nepal's highest non-technical trekking mountain, Mera Peak. Since I never truly believed I would be good enough to climb Mount Everest, Mera Peak was intended to be my substitute on the continent of Asia, or so I thought.

Next, I was off to Russia to climb Europe's highest peak, Mount Elbrus. With my health still strong, I trained on Mexican volcanoes for a climb of Mt. McKinley the following spring—or Denali as mountaineers call it. Thirty days of climbing, wearing a 60-pound pack as I dragged a 60-pound sled full of gear in the frigid Alaskan temperatures, would test my physical strength beyond anything I had ever experienced. With an investment of \$10,000 in extreme weather gear, along with a determination that would not stop, I reached North America's highest peak in May of 2006.

Upon returning from the strenuous expedition on Denali, I was told that my persistent back pain was caused by a cyst on a nerve in my spine, which was being pinched between two disks. The cyst had developed from a slow leak of spinal fluid due to a faulty spinal tap done by a young medical student when I was first diagnosed. After back surgery and recovery time, followed by training to rebuild my strength, I was ready to move forward again.

With ice axe in hand and the desire to complete my dream of setting foot on each continent and climbing the Seven Summits, I climbed Australia's Mt. Kosciusko in July of 2008 and Mt. Vinson in Antarctica that November. I saved the best for last, and with my freshly-honed climbing

skills and a renewed determination to give it my best shot, I set foot on the top of the world, Mt. Everest, on May 23, 2009.

I have been blessed in my life with many gifts, including opportunities to travel and climb. These experiences have enriched my life, and for that I am truly grateful. My biggest reward through all of this has been learning about overcoming fear and limitations and sharing these lessons with others. I formed a company called Empowerment Through Adventure, reaching out to those in need of a little courage of their own. It has been my dream to change the negative experience of being diagnosed with MS into one of growth and self-discovery. The goal of ETA is to empower others to move beyond their limitations and live their dreams.

Through my website, social media, speaking engagements, and adventure activities, I teach that ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things. I encourage others to take a leap of faith in their personal lives and climb their own mountains. We all have challenges to face, and our biggest obstacles are often the ones we place in our own path. When we move past our fears and rediscover our inner strength, we empower ourselves to move forward with courage. We learn that if we believe, oftentimes, we can achieve.

This desire to help others move beyond the mental mountains of fear and doubt was the driving force behind the Kilimanjaro Leap of Faith climb. I knew that climbing had given me the courage to face other obstacles in my own life with unwavering determination. Now it was my turn to help others move beyond their own perceived

limitations of living with MS or Parkinson's disease.

I assembled a climbing team of 28 determined individuals, ranging in age from 23 to 79 years young—the oldest being my father. Each member had their own abilities, while 14 had a diagnosed disability of MS or PD. The remaining 14 joined the team as companion climbers, helping their partner every step of the way. Some had never visited a mountain in their life and few had ever climbed one before. All had a desire to take a leap of faith and challenge themselves to push beyond the normal parameters in their own lives. It was a chance to see what they were made of. It was also our chance as a team to shatter the world's perceptions of what is possible for a person with a neurodegenerative illness. It was time to show the world our abilities and see past our own disabilities. It was time to climb beyond our limits.

More than a Mountain is a collection of voices from those people who took a leap of faith together that dark summit night, on a mountain called Kilimanjaro. Kili at 19,340 feet is the largest free-standing mountain in the world and is a challenge for all. It tests the physical boundaries of the body and mental boundaries deep within one's soul. It challenges the endurance of the human spirit. In 2011, these 14 brave men and women with multiple sclerosis or Parkinson's disease, along with their supportive climbing companions, stepped outside of their individual comfort zones and took a leap. They made history. They leaped beyond what others thought possible for a person with a neurodegenerative disease. They trusted in the unknown, the unproven. They pushed their limits and each reached their own personal summits. For these 28 brave

souls, Kilimanjaro truly was *More than a Mountain*. It was a Leap of Faith.

October 2012

Lori Schneider