

Pass It On®...

Climb Higher, Leave Behind what Ails you.

Dr. Rick Nielsen, entrepreneur and founder of Rocky Mountain University of Health Professions and the Noorda College of Osteopathic Medicine in Utah, has climbed Kilimanjaro 10 times. His wife, Jodi, has summited the mountain twice. They have returned to that mountain so others can feel the pain, and the exhilaration of freedom.

Elevation 19,341 feet. Hike the world's highest freestanding mountain, and you will feel every step.

The journey takes an average of five to six days. Because the mountain is on the equator, the climate starts off warm and could drop to minus 20 at the top. The altitude change is so severe that hikers must acclimate as they go, pausing, traversing, being mindful of breathing and too much exertion.

"It is not the physical challenges that set you back," Dr. Nielsen says. "It is the mental. You have to summon the will to keep going, step after step, day after day."

The mountain is unyielding, most formidable when hikers are most fatigued. Yet more than 30,000 people make the pilgrimage each year to test their physical endurance and mental stamina and awaken their spiritual awareness.

"It is a classroom without walls," Jodi Nielsen says. "The mountain is always talking to you, always teaching you."

The journey begins with preparation — a lot of it. Every detail is attended to. Each piece of gear is checked. Packing is meticulous: cold weather clothes on the bottom, warm on top, water bottles stored upside down so that when they freeze you can turn them over and still get water. And there's hiking, lots of it, to get in shape. Finally, there is the emotional preparation.

"Each person we take is encouraged to write a list of their weapons of rebellion," Dr. Nielsen teaches. Self-defeating actions are labeled as weapons because bad habits and behaviors are what bring us down, creating a chasm between the ordinary and the extraordinary person. These may include selfishness, unkind words, mistrust, greed, power

and control, among others. The weapons get very personal. Each hiker stows their symbolically heavy burdens on a 3x5 card in a pack pocket.

And the mountain calls. The first few days seem easy, although legs are wobbly by day three. The elevation is relentless. Vision tunnels to the immediate present, the next step, and the next.

"Every hiker chooses their summit," Jodi Nielsen says. "The height is personal. To summit is to realize you are more than your goals."

The top of the mountain is named Uhuru, the Swahili word for freedom. It is here that hikers bury their weapons and stand defenseless on the mountain, vulnerable to the forces of extreme weather. They accept a new self, a new way of living on a higher plane.

"My husband came home a changed man," one wife tearfully told the Niensens. And that's the idea. To be free from the weapons we rely on to protect ourselves from the wounds of personal growth.

"Weapon-free packs feel much lighter coming down," Dr. Nielsen says. "The mental burden is real. It's physical. The release is just as real."

We all have some weapon or armor to bury for good — for our greater good.

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