

Going for the top

Hoboken blind man prepares to climb mountain

By Eugene Mulero
Reporter staff writer

He may be blind, but that's never slowed him down. Eddie Montanez, a 40-year-old Hoboken resident, became blind at the age of 13. Both his retinas detached naturally, and ever since then he has been adjusting to a life without sight.

He grew up on Willow Street in Hoboken and now lives with his brother on Washington Street. While growing up, his brother always encouraged him to participate in sports. So Montanez would run, lift weights and ride a stationary bike. Through the years he developed stamina and strength.

The very independent Montanez has worked for more than four years at a computer help desk for Associated Blind, a non-profit organization based in New York City designed to help blind people.

"Working here, I feel I help people like myself," he said.

In the mid 1980s, Montanez joined the prestigious Achilles Track Club in New York City. The track club is exclusive for people with disabilities.

"I wanted to run and I heard very good things about Achilles," Montanez said. "I like the meetings and going to the gym for the workouts."

Montanez participated in small events. After gaining confidence and experience, he ran in the 1992 New York City Marathon. There, he discovered something important about himself.

"At mile 11 I got hurt, so I walked the rest of the way," Montanez said. "I was in pain and wanted to quit, but I couldn't quit. I'm not a quitter."

After the marathon, he continued to participate in small events, but his attitude was forever changed. He realized he could finish anything he started.

Now Montanez is focusing on another challenge.

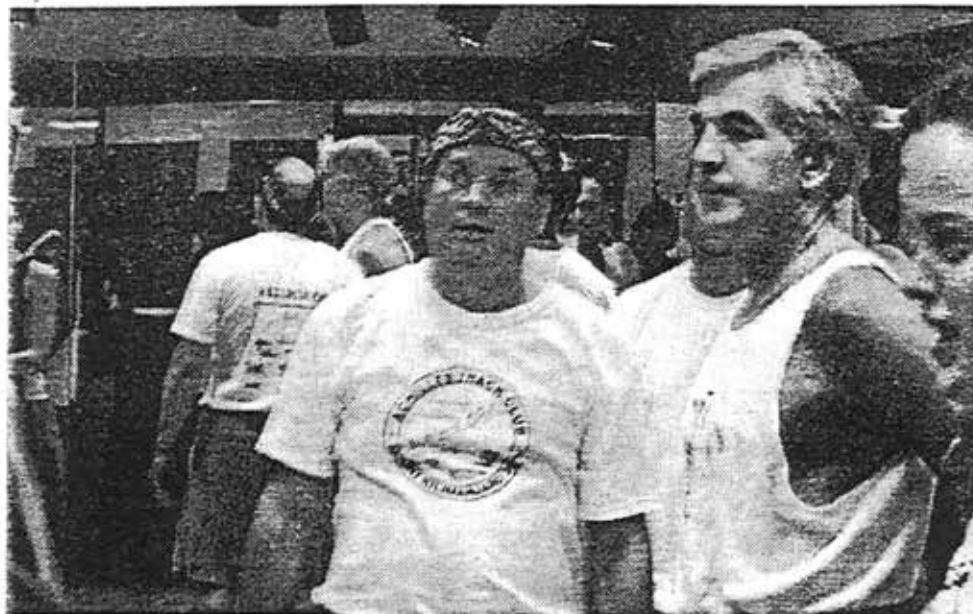
He will be part of a 24-person team, which will include six disabled members and 18 volunteers, that will head to Tanzania, Africa from Aug. 20 to Sept. 6 to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Dangerous trek

The mountain is the highest on the continent at a height of 19,345 feet, and it is also very dangerous. But Montanez is confident he can climb all the way to the top, and he has faith his teammates will do the same.

"I very much want to go and climb," he said last week. "The idea of climbing all the way to the top and to stand at the top of this huge mountain, the biggest in Africa, is very appealing to me."

The team's goal is to send the message to the able-bodied and disabled community alike that "disabled does not mean unable," according to Achilles Track Club spokeswoman Sara Au.



BECAUSE IT'S THERE — Eddie Montanez training at New York Sports Club on Lexington Avenue in New York City.

The team, known as the Achilles Kilimanjaro Expedition, describes itself as "regular Joes" going out there to have fun and make new friends.

"I'm not a hero; I'm just an average person. I do things because I want to, not to be admired," Montanez said.

Climbing the mountain is not a quest for glory, but a personal journey of the mind and human spirit, said Montanez.

"Others think I am trying to prove something because I am blind. To this, I simply say that if I could see, I would still be getting ready for this trip."

Team leader and coach Adrienne Cooney works out with the team every week at the New York Sports Club on Lexington Avenue,

ensuring they will be ready for the climb. And, she said, this event is important because it will give hope to people who think they can't do certain activities because they have a disability.

"We aim to educate by example, showing the world that disabled people can regularly succeed at an extreme sport like mountain climbing," Cooney said. "This expedition is all about improvement of the human spirit, for ourselves and hopefully for all those who hear about our accomplishments."

The Achilles Track Club is an international non-profit group that encourages people with all kinds of disabilities to exercise with the general public, according to Au. Founded in New York City in 1983, it has expanded to 10,000 members in 63 countries. □