

# Part 2

LIFESTYLES  
**FASHION  
& FITNESS**

Hoops  
Workout

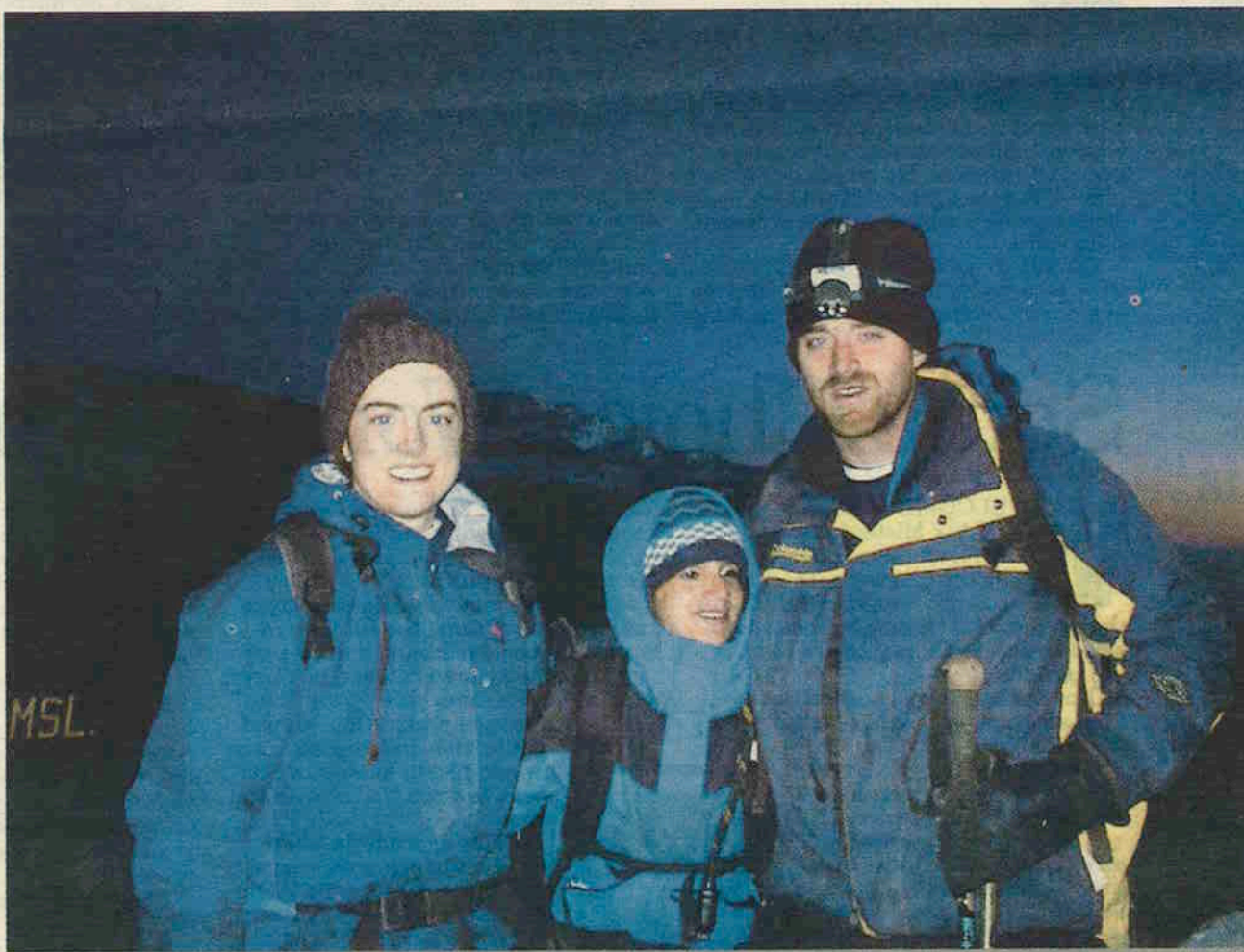
**B 10**



Distributing Clean Coats of Many Colors, B3



## Extraordinary Climb



Blind climber Ivonne Mosquera, center, with guides Adrienne and Michael Cooney

Photo Courtesy of Art Markart

## Extraordinary Climbers

When six disabled athletes, including three who are blind, took on Mount Kilimanjaro, it was a triumph of spirit and teamwork

**B6-7**

By John Haric

Q Part 2

**E**RNEST HEMINGWAY, who saw it and later immortalized it in a short story, called Mount Kilimanjaro "wide as the whole world, great, high and unbelievably white in the sun."

Eddie Montanez never saw the mountain. But as he stood earlier this month at the top of Kilimanjaro — 19,340 feet above the savanna and valleys of Tanzania — he felt the warmth and intensity of the sun on his face, and the satisfaction of knowing that he had climbed it, experienced it . . . even though he is blind.

Montanez was part of one of the most extraordinary ascents ever made up the slopes of this fabled peak; a team climb by six physically disabled athletes, a cancer survivor and their guides from the New York City-based Achilles Track Club.

Located 205 miles south of the equator, looming like a sentinel over the Rift Valley — the cradle of mankind — and one of the largest freestanding mountains in the world, Mount Kilimanjaro attracts 22,000 climbers a year. They come from all over the world, lured by the prospect of summiting a major peak without having to do any technical climbing. No crampons, axes or ropes are needed — just good shoes, good guides and a great deal of determination.

The New Yorkers were not the first disabled climbers to tackle "Kili," as it's called. Last year, two members of the Achilles club's South Africa chapter reached the top. When they were in the United States for the New York City Marathon in November, the South Africans told their Achilles counterparts in Manhattan about the climb, about the beauty of the land, about the experience of standing on the Roof of Africa.

"I'd never climbed a mountain," said Montanez, who works in Manhattan for Blind Associated, a non-profit organization that benefits the visually disabled. "The idea of climbing *this* mountain, the highest place in Africa, it didn't take much to grab me."

The huge task of organizing the trip fell to Adrienne Cooney, an able-bodied, 28-year-old project manager for the Achilles Track Club. Cooney, who grew up in Floral Park and Garden City South, left a job in sports marketing to work in an organization where she could help others and, she said, "where I could immediately see the fruits of my labors."

The Achilles Track Club was just such a place. The organization's co-founder and president, Dick Traum, was the first amputee to complete the New York City Marathon, which he did on a pair of crutches, in 1976. Seven years later, Traum and five other

*'I'd never climbed a mountain. The idea of climbing this mountain, the highest place in Africa, it didn't take much to grab me.'*

— Eddie Montanez

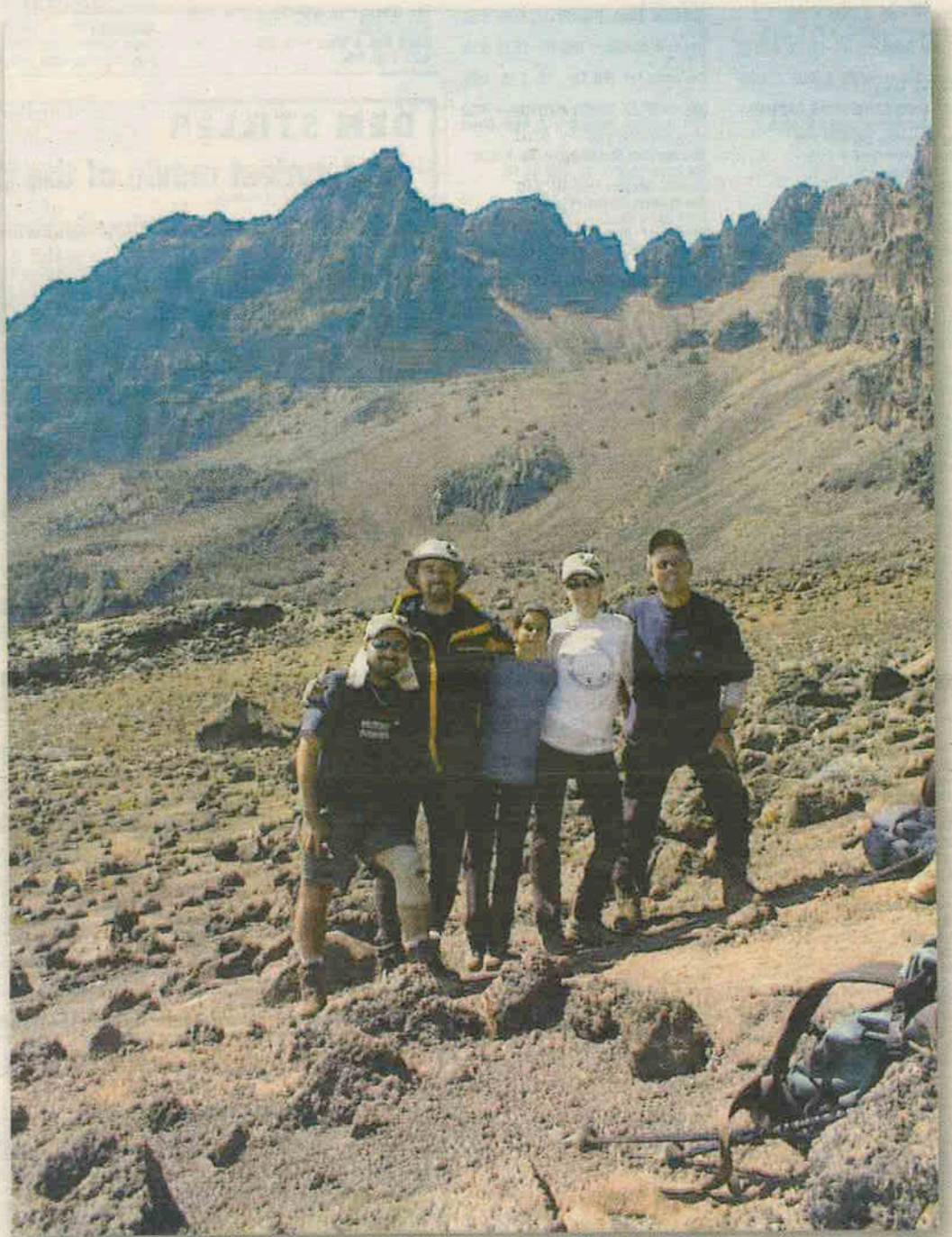


Photo Courtesy of Art Markart

**A**

A massive achievement: From left, climbers Tom Hoffman, Michael Cooney, Ivonne Mosquera, Adrienne Cooney and Art Markart stand beneath Mawenzi Peak.

# Triumph Of Spirit

For six disabled athletes, including three who are blind, tackling Mount Kilimanjaro was a testament to teamwork

amputee marathoners started Achilles, to help other disabled athletes enjoy the satisfaction of training for and completing a 26.2-mile marathon. Now, Achilles athletes and their able-bodied guides are a fixture in the NYC Marathon; the organization has grown to 10,000 disabled athletes — mostly runners — in 63 chapters around the world.

"What I've done is help to teach [disabled] people how to achieve," Traum says. "What Adrienne did is to take this process, which was aimed at running, and brought it into a new area, climbing."

It wasn't easy. Cooney — one of those people who seems to get the job done competently and cheerfully, no matter what is thrown at her — had to work on several fronts: organizing the logistics of the expedition, fund-raising, and coordinating a conditioning program for the athletes and the volunteer guides. Even though technical mountaineering skills are not needed on Mount Kilimanjaro, peak physical condition is. The importance of this is related in an article on the travel Web site gorp.com, in which writer Tom Dunkel tells the story of a dermatologist from Georgia who, despite being overweight and out of shape, insisted on climbing the mountain. At one precarious point during the climb, the doctor — huffing and puffing — offered his guide an extra \$300 to ensure that he would get him to the top. The guide recommended he turn back. The doctor refused — and died of a heart attack on the mountain. The guide, Dunkel says, carries the doctor's business card in his wallet, "a reminder that nobody can buy their way up Kilimanjaro."

Cooney was determined that none of her charges would be leaving their business cards for posterity in Tanzania. A former cross-country runner at Fordham University, she enlisted the help of Fabian St. Rose, a personal trainer at New York Sports Clubs in Manhattan, who had climbed Kilimanjaro the previous year. Together, they designed a three-month conditioning program for the group — members ranged in age from 24 to 56 — that included weight training in the gym and running repeats up the steep, 110th Street Hill in Central Park. "We totally reworked our bodies for this," Cooney said, jokingly.

On Aug. 20, a group of 27 people — the seven athletes and 20 able-bodied guides, including Cooney and St. Rose — were en route to London. From there, they boarded a flight to Nairobi, Kenya, and then took a five-hour van ride across the Tanzanian border into Arusha, the largest town near Kilimanjaro, and a common staging point for expeditions up the mountain. Among the volunteer guides were Adrienne's brother Michael Cooney, who lives in Syosset; Jerry Esmond and his wife, Jenny Mincin, of Douglaston; and Art Markart of Nesconset.

Markart, 54, got involved through his friend, Achilles member Artie Elefant, one of the visually disabled athletes. "He said, 'We've got to do something crazy before we get too old,'" Markart recalled. "'Let's climb Mount Kilimanjaro.' We were drinking our second martini at the time, and I said, 'Sure,' not thinking he was serious. But then it got to be truly inspirational for me."

Of the six disabled athletes, four are blind or visually disabled, one is deaf and one is an arm amputee. Unlike Erik Weihenmayer, the blind climber who reached the peak of Mount Everest last spring, none of these disabled athletes is a trained climber. They are, in Traum's words, "ordinary disabled folks." (Weihenmayer, who ran the NYC Marathon as an Achilles member a few years ago, sent the team an e-mail before they left, urging them to "climb high.")

Awaiting them in Arusha was Richard Mars-

den, a British native and an experienced Kilimanjaro climb leader. This would be the largest group he had ever led; and the first time he'd ever led anyone disabled up the slopes of the mountain. "It was a step into the unknown," Marsden said. When the group arrived, he said, "I was pleasantly surprised to find a real buzz of anticipation and a great group feeling. Everyone was here to help each other, particularly the athletes, reach their goal."

First, the team took several days to tour the area and acclimate to the higher elevation. They went on a safari, and visited ancient volcano craters nearby. In Arusha, they were joined by a team from National Geographic, which videotaped the Achilles expedition for a future TV special, and by a group of 71 native guides, working with Marsden, who would set up the camps and cook the food for the Achilles climbers along the way.

The team had decided to take a less popular route up Kilimanjaro, from the north. "The road less traveled," Cooney said with a laugh, "and we loved it. The path we took was over undulating hills, and brambles and streams . . . it was gorgeous." At first, it felt like a hike through exotic scenery. It has been said that Kilimanjaro is not just a mountain, it's an ecosystem — and the climbers saw proof of that as

they hiked through the rain forest, then through the moorlands of heather and scrub brush, and eventually, as they got higher, into volcanic rocks (Kilimanjaro is made up of three extinct volcanoes) and, finally, to the icy peaks that so impressed and inspired Hemingway when he saw them in the 1930s.

Climbing up more than 18,000 feet of ever-changing terrain — not to mention ever-thinning oxygen and extreme temperature changes — is tough for anyone. How does a blind person do it? At first, the team tried a system of using ropes attached to their guides' backpacks. But the ropes were not sensitive enough to the touch of the blind climbers, who needed to feel every subtle movement in the guide's

body to know which way to go. The system was revised, so that each of the three blind climbers had a guide in front and back. The blind athlete kept his or her hand on the backpack of the guide in front the entire time, and also responded to verbal cues from the rear guide. Finding the right touch on the backpack was tricky at first. "You didn't want to put too much pressure on the person or use it [the backpack] as something to hold on to," Montanez said. Quickly, though, the blind climbers mastered it. "They were so surefooted, so attuned to my body," Cooney said.

The guides also worked hard to try to relate to the blind climbers the extraordinary sights around them. "The visual descriptions were awesome," said Ivonne Mosquera, a blind climber from Manhattan. "To actually hear the sense of awe in their voices as they described it to us was really neat."

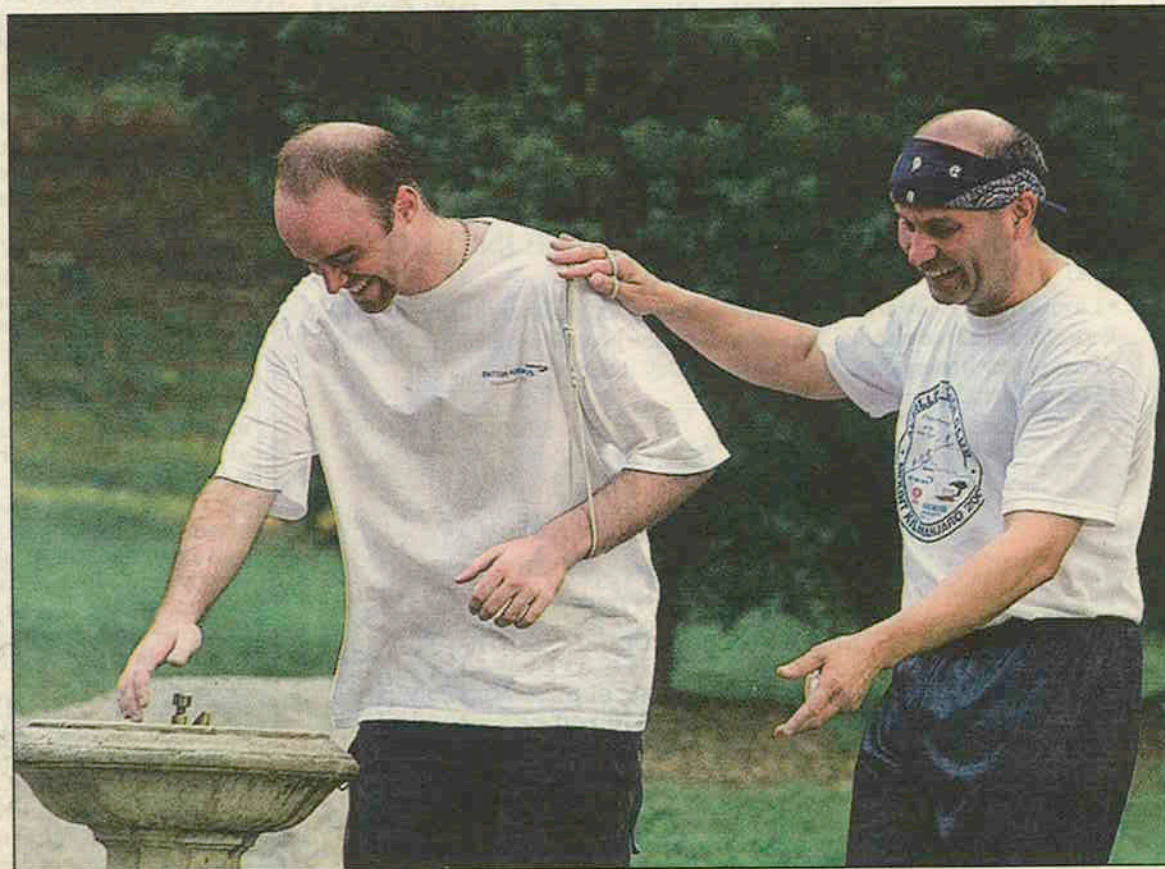
But the three blind climbers — Montanez, Mosquera and Julius Wilson — also relied on their own extraordinarily well-tuned senses to help paint a vivid picture of the mountain. "You could get a great sense of the wide open space around you, just being on some of the rocks," Mosquera said. "You can really feel the drop-off." There was much to touch, as well — rocks, grass, even an elephant skull the climbers found. And the smell. "That was powerful," Mosquera said. "Just the crispness and cleanliness in the air."

Progress was slow, as expected, and the team was soon spread out over the long approaches to the mountain. It took seven days to reach the top, and for some of the slower disabled climbers, particularly those who were more affected by the altitude changes, 14-hour days were not uncommon. At night, they made camp, where — over steaming bowls of vegetable soup — they began to develop friendships with the African porters. Mosquera brought along her own Braille / Swahili dictionary and, by the end of the trip, was speaking to the porters in their native language. The Tanzanians showed they were multilingual, too, which Montanez learned to his surprise when some of the guides started speaking Spanish to him. "They were really funny," Montanez said. "As we go into the colder parts, one of the porters suddenly yelled out to me in Spanish, 'Welcome to

See CLIMB on B18



Mount Kilimanjaro was a step into the unknown for the group.



Achilles Track Club guide Michael Cooney, left, and member Eddie Montanez after a tough workout to train for the climb

Newsday Photo / Ken Spencer