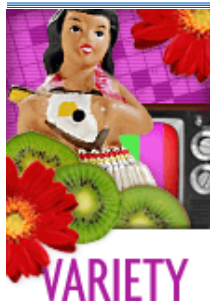


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Travel: Chaska climber says it's lonely at the top

Chris Welsch, Star Tribune

July 10, 2005 NMTR0710

Neal Mueller of Chaska reached the pinnacle of his four-year mountaineering career when he summited Mount Everest June 3. He became the second Minnesotan to reach the world's highest peak. He returned home June 9, and we spoke to him recently.

You look thinner. How are you feeling?

I feel great now, light, strong. And very calm. Everest changes your perspective. The little things aren't bothering me. But I did lose 30 pounds.

What was the biggest surprise about the expedition?

I knew it would require patience, but I didn't realize how much patience. The latest summit ever before this year was Edmund Hillary's -- the first one. He went up on May 29. I didn't summit until June 2. We had a late monsoon [the beginning of the monsoon season brings a brief period of more stable weather to the mountain, making ascent possible]. So we had two months in base camp, just waiting for our time to come.

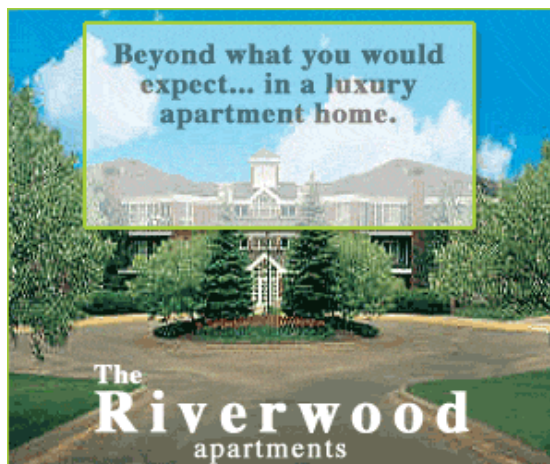
The other thing that surprised me was what a big community base camp was. There were more than 200 people there from all over the world -- Brazil, Japan, Argentina, United States, Canada, Iran, Germany. We all came together as climbers, and when there was an avalanche at Camp 1, everyone pitched in on the rescue and cleanup.

Two of the key players on your expedition didn't summit. Your guide Jim Williams and friend Chris Grubb. What happened to them?

Jim had some health problems -- asthma -- and he stayed at Camp 2 [at 2,100 feet]. There are two parts to guiding on Everest. One is the logistics, having relationships with local people, making arrangements. The second part is on the mountain, deciding when to go up, watching the weather patterns, making medical decisions. He wasn't there to help us make the decision when to summit.

Chris was healthy, I thought he was in better shape than me, but on the night we started the final ascent, his summit sherpa got way out ahead of

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Neal Mueller climbs Everest

Chris Welsch
Star Tribune

him, and Chris couldn't signal him back. Chris had a problem with his oxygen mask that he couldn't fix, and he had to turn back.

You told me before that one reason you love mountaineering is for the emotional release you get when you summit. What was it like on top of Everest?

It was lonely, very lonely. It was sad not to have Chris there by my side. It was just me and four or five sherpas and one guy from China who'd climbed up solo. . . . It was very peaceful up there. It's a holy place for the sherpas, and they were praying. They are Buddhists who believe their god lives on the top of Everest, so it is the holiest of holy places for them. I just stood there and took in the view. I could see three or four of the world's highest mountains. I could see into India. I didn't weep. It was a bummer. I just sat there and looked at the view. I was unbelievably tired.

I didn't really feel what had happened until I got back to the tent at Camp 4 [at 2,600 feet; the final camp before the summit]. I sat in my tent and was really happy I didn't get hurt.

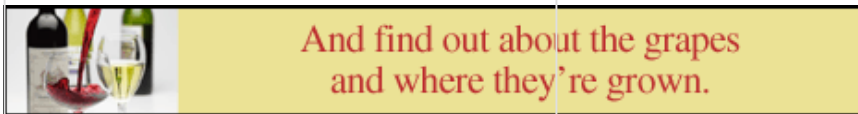
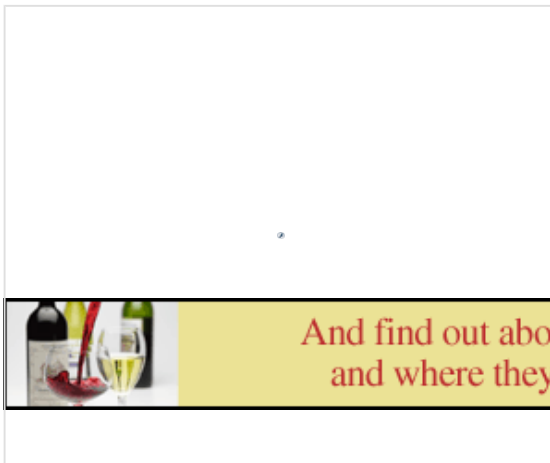
You were trying to raise money before you left. You thought that if you didn't raise enough, you'd have to cash out your 401(k) savings account. How did that go?

I ended up raising \$20,000 (toward the \$60,000 cost) so I didn't have to use all my own money.

Now that you've achieved your goal will you keep climbing?

I'm leading an expedition on Mount Ranier (in Washington State) in August and I'm doing Kosciuszko in Australia in December with my whole family [his mother, Dr. Laura Mueller of Chaska, and two sisters, Beth and Emily]. Kosciuszko is the last of the Seven Summits [the highest mountain on each of the seven continents] for me, but it's only 8,000 feet. . . . A mountain like Ranier, you can climb in two or three days, you can do it and not love mountains. But Everest takes at least two months, you have to love mountains to do it. I love mountains. I want to go back. Chris is talking about trying it again in 2007, and I'm thinking I'll go along.

Chris Welsh is at welsch@startribune.com



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