

Local teen scales famed Mt. McKinley

TED BROWN
Staff Writer

Many university students are told to set their sights high, but in Darren Pezzack's case, he took the phrase literally.

The local 19-year-old Halton Hills resident, a Georgetown District High School graduate entering his second year at the University of Western Ontario, recently summited Mount McKinley in Alaska. At 20,300 feet, McKinley is the tallest peak in North America, and one of the famed Seven Summits.

"As a kid, I went on canoe trips with my mom and dad," said Pezzack, "and as I got older, I progressed to backpacking, and would look up and see those big mountains sticking out of the sky. Three years ago, when I was backpacking on the Kesugi Ridge in Denali Park, (Alaska) I looked up and saw Mount McKinley, standing there, so clear—and I looked at it for four days straight while backpacking. After looking at it for that length of time, I just had to (climb it)."

After taking a few mountaineering courses, Pezzack applied to the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), to sign up for the Denali Mountaineering course, which featured a spring ascent of McKinley. His group included eight students and three instructors—Pezack was the only Canadian on the climb.

NOLS is a month-long course, specializing in wilderness training and mountaineering.

"I left Ontario May 31, and the actual trip started June 2," said Pezzack. "The trip took 25 days."

Pezack's group took a more difficult approach, following the Muldrow Glacier route which took four days hiking across the tundra to reach the McGonagall Pass. (Most groups use the less challenging West Buttress approach.)

Once on the glacier, they continued up the Muldrow Glacier, encountering crevasses and deep snow. The route then ascended Karsten's

Ridge to the Harper Glacier, and on to the summit ridge.

At Harper Glacier, they established camp at 17,000 feet, from which they continued to the 20,320 foot summit.

"I think Karsten's Ridge was the most challenging part," said Pezzack. "We camped right of the ridge, where it was wider, and could support the tents."

At times, Pezzack said it was like walking on a knife edge, the edge of the ridge coming up to almost a point, where it drops off several thousand feet with sheer walls on either side.

The climbers were tethered together, in case one fell, and the others could support him.

"On the way back down, one guy actually fell and dislocated his shoulder when he caught himself on the edge," said Pezzack. "He put it (his shoulder) back in himself and carried on with the climb."

Keeping the team supplied with provisions, like food and fuel, was a daunting task as well. The team had a cache of supplies at McGonagall Pass where they had been brought in beforehand by dog sled. They then ferried them up to the next camp site, and made several trips back and forth until they were all moved up.

"Most times, the backpacks we carried weighed more than 100 pounds," said Pezzack. "They were pretty big—we carried everything with us—our food, tents, and fuel to cook our meals. In addition, we also had some sleds with supplies on them."

Sleeping on a mountain was a challenge too.

"It was cold, some days -35C, with an additional wind chill factor on top of that. The wind was gusting at 50 to 75 km/h, making it feel colder," said Pezzack. "Everyday normal tasks like drinking water meant you had to get out your stove and melt some snow to have a drink."

The other challenge the climbers faced was the thin air, where the oxygen levels were so low.

"It was remarkable," said Pezzack. "The smallest job took great effort. Even walking downhill, I found myself out of breath at times."

Pezack said he became a bit disoriented at times, but was able to make it to the summit.

The day before the final ascent, Pezzack said they had made camp, but had to wait out a storm, spending the day in their tents, going outside periodically to make sure the tent wasn't buried.

"The next day it cleared," said Pezzack. "So we were able to make it to the summit around 8 a.m. It was fairly nice weather, but at Denali Pass at 18,000 feet, the wind was starting to hit us—it wasn't that clear when we made the summit, but on the way back down it opened



Darren Pezzack on the summit of Mount McKinley. Being the only Canadian on the team, Pezzack made sure he brought along a Canadian flag, to leave his mark on top. (Below) The mountaineers' camp on Karsten's Ridge. Photos courtesy of Darren Pezzack



ABBY KNIGHT

Fund set up for ailing tot

LISA TALLYN
Staff Writer

A trust fund has been established to aid a local couple and their baby daughter who is in Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children with a serious heart defect.

Abby Knight, born April 16, does not have a right ventricle in her heart, and has been in hospital for the past month undergoing heart surgeries and fighting off infections.

Her parents, Trevor and Nathalie Knight of Georgetown, have been at the little girl's bedside in the critical care ward around the clock.

It's been difficult for the family, as they also have a three-year-old son Caiden who is being cared for by his grandparents John and Darlene Knight of Georgetown and Omer and Yvette Lavoie of Orillia.

Nathalie is on maternity leave from her job at Porte Soleil Daycare, and Trevor, who was laid off from his job in May, has had to stop looking for work as his focus has been on being at the hospital with his daughter. At this point, it's unknown how long Abby will have to stay in the hospital.

To help the family through this time, other family members have established a trust fund.

Donations can be made to the fund at any TD Canada Trust location. The branch number is 2472 and the account number is 6291629.

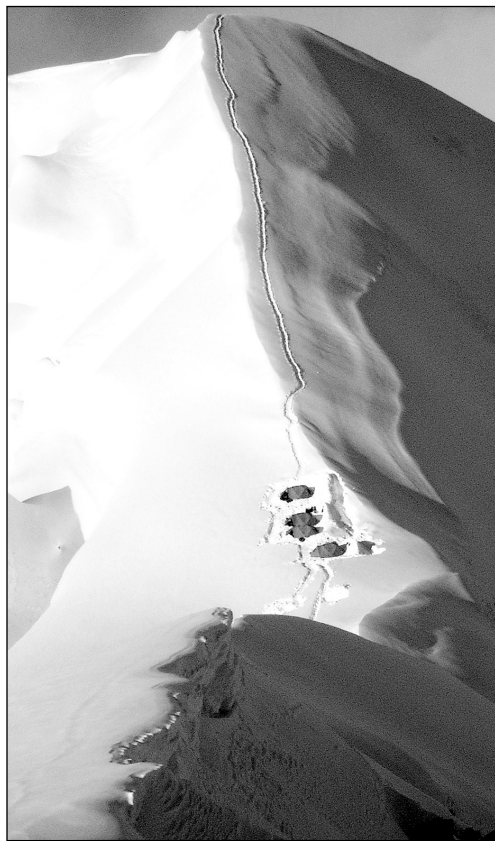
Cheques can be made out In Trust to Darlene Knight or Joanne Knight. Joanne is Abby's aunt.

Doctors have already performed the Glenn procedure on Abby to reroute the blood flow through the lungs to the heart, but then had to reverse it because, Nathalie said, "her veins weren't giving enough pressure to the lungs."

Doctors then installed a shunt and hope to perform the Glenn procedure again in October. More surgery, known as the Fontan procedure, will be required when Abby is between two and four years of age.

Nathalie said Abby recently got pneumonia and also contracted a fungal infection.

"She's fighting," said Nathalie. "They've told us she's very sick. It's going to be a bumpy road. They are optimistic."



up, and we could see for miles and miles. It was absolutely beautiful."

Mount McKinley wasn't Pezzack's first climb. Over the years, he has climbed some lesser mountains in both Alaska and Washington state. And closer to home, he's done some rock climbing at Rattlesnake Point in Milton.

Being a 'starving student,' Pezzack isn't sure where his next climb will be, but he knows there will most certainly be more.

"I'd really like to climb in the Himalayas," he said. "Not necessarily Mount Everest, but certainly one of the other mountains in that area."



Darren Pezzack sets up his 'kitchen' outside his tent as he prepares breakfast during his ascent of Mount McKinley.

Photo courtesy Darren Pezzack

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