

## Area residents scale Kilimanjaro for AIDS charity

Lisa Chamoff, Staff Writer

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Diane Terry had hiked for more than 35 hours up Mount Kilimanjaro when her pounding headache just wouldn't subside, and didn't respond to handfuls of Advil or emergency oxygen.

Though the high altitude kept Terry from reaching the summit of Africa's highest mountain earlier this month, the Greenwich resident feels she still succeeded in her most important goal -- bringing a group of women together for a once-in-a-lifetime experience, while also helping out a cause she believes in.

For the last 15 years Terry, 51, has led women's-only adventure trips to places around the globe. The latest trip brought together 13 women, the majority from Greenwich, to scale Kilimanjaro and raise money for the Red Ribbon Foundation. The Greenwich-based organization, founded years ago by a town doctor and his wife, supports local and international HIV/AIDS education, research and assistance programs.

Terry sits on the foundation's board. She lived in San Francisco during the height of the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, and lost a close friend to the disease. Combining one of the issues she cares about with her desire to tackle Kilimanjaro seemed a natural fit.

"Clearly, for me, it was about doing something really positive," Terry said of the climbing the mountain in Tanzania. "It was about encouraging the other climbers to step out of their boxes and live fully and do something really exciting, and at the same time help others to raise some much-needed funds."

A second group of men started their climb on Thursday.

Before the women began climbing on Oct. 3, the group visited Nyumbani, an orphanage in nearby Kenya for children with AIDS who had been abandoned by their parents. A quarter of the money raised through the climb, which Terry says is close to \$25,000, will benefit the orphanage.

Greenwich resident Michele Perri has traveled with Terry before, including on trips to Bolivia and Tibet, and decided to climb Kilimanjaro to mark her upcoming 50th birthday. While she had suffered altitude sickness during the trip to Tibet, Perri said she took plenty of medicine before traveling to Tanzania, and was able to reach the summit of 19,000-foot-plus Kilimanjaro, which included seeing part of the mountain that not all climbers get to see. The experience included climbing up a huge cliff wall and viewing massive glaciers.



Perri, an interior designer, had also been to Africa before with Terry, and accompanied her on prior trips to Nyumbani. She said she was drawn to the spirit of the place.

"These children are without parents, and yet you saw the contentment ... (and the) feeling that they were really a family," Perri said. "They just have such great spirits."

Perri was joined for the birthday adventure by her friend Laurie Jeffrey, also of Greenwich. Jeffrey said the experience, as someone who had never even gone camping before, was "way outside of my comfort zone."

Despite the challenge, the hike and meeting the children at Nyumbani was an amazing experience, said Jeffrey, 48, a wealth manager for Morgan Stanley in Greenwich.

"It's one thing if you're just going to house them while they're ill," Jeffrey said of the orphanage. "What they're doing there is a whole other level of education and support."

While the hike was grueling, the women were accompanied by dozens of porters carrying tents, flush toilets and a hyperbaric oxygen chamber, Terry said. The hikers paid close to \$6,000 for the high-end experience, and were required to contribute at least \$500 to the Red Ribbon Foundation. Some gave more, and also had family members and friends donate to the cause.

For Robin Suerig, who grew up in Greenwich and now lives in Mendham, N.J., the trip had a special meaning. Her father and stepmother, Karl and Florence Suerig, started the Red Ribbon Foundation after her stepbrother, Michael Faerman, died of AIDS nearly 20 years ago, when he was in his early 30s. The organization began with simple jazz concerts at Greenwich Library, and now contributes to agencies that help people living with AIDS in Fairfield and Westchester counties, as well as international organizations such as Nyumbani.

"My father and my stepmother thought it was important for someone in the family to go," said Suerig, 49. "I think AIDS unfortunately is not on the radar screen as much as it used to be. It doesn't mean that it's no longer a problem."

One of the porters told Suerig he thought that the U.S. already had developed a cure for AIDS, but that it just hadn't come to Africa yet.

"For me personally, I would have gotten to the top for Michael if I had to crawl on my hands and knees," she said.

Florence Suerig, who followed the climb through a blog set up to track the trip, said she thought the adventure was symbolic of the foundation's mission.

"I think it parallels the strength of people to look for the good in others and try to rise above being self-centered," she said. "It's a wonderful tribute to people who have given their lives."

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