

In July 2007, I was part of a team travelling to Kenya with the hope of achieving something you only ever read about. Thirteen of us had worked all year raising sponsorship as well as training ourselves physically for the challenge. Mentally however, there was little we could have done to prepare us for the experience that was to follow. We were the Gold Duke of Edinburgh International Award group and as, part of the award; our challenge was to climb Mt. Kenya, the third highest mountain in the world. This was the first time anyone from Brunei had ever undertaken such a challenge and although we were excited, we were just as anxious.

I had never been forced to push myself the way I did on that trip. Physically, I knew that I had the stamina to make it to the top. At 4985 meters, the summit did not sound very high especially as we started our ascent from 2200 meters. However, those five days over which we climbed to the top will probably rate as the most demanding and strenuous days of my life. Not only did I lose all sensation in my legs but carrying all my equipment up and down hills in a rucksack completely wore out my shoulders to the extent that I could not even lift my arms for a couple of days after. The only consolation I felt at the time was that everyone suffered just as much or perhaps even more than I did. We all went through the same emotions and the same pain and suffering but those very feelings also brought us closer together as we depended on one another for emotional and physical support. We had worked on teamwork all year round before the trip but after it we were more of a family than a team.

We were always told that to make it to the top only required 10% physical stamina. The rest of it was a mental battle that we would all have to fight within ourselves. I thought that if it required so little stamina, it would be a breeze but I could not have made a greater mistake. Climbing at altitude brought with it certain dangers, especially altitude sickness. I clearly remember having to stop repeatedly due to breathlessness and a series of headaches that really set in once we were above 4000 meters. Walking had become mechanical for all of us but having to deal constantly with a throbbing headache was not. Personally, that was the greatest challenge; to be able to ignore the agony and continue walking.

I make it sound like a nightmare and until the instant I stepped onto the summit, it was. However, the second I saw the flag at the top I forgot about all the cold nights and the long days, all the groaning muscles and the pounding headaches and all the regret I had felt in the past few days of ever deciding to go on this trip. It was the most beautiful sunrise I had ever seen in my life. I just stood there and stared out into the distance retracing our path up until it was swallowed by cloud. Then there was nothing but euphoria. Every one of us had achieved the impossible. It was beyond description. I had never been more proud of myself in my life. We all hugged each other and took many photographs and though it was below freezing I cannot remember ever being more energetic.

Often when we had to be pushed to keep going, our teachers told us we would thank them for it and when anyone said "I give up" they were told there is always a light at the end of a tunnel. That tunnel took over four days to end but the light we saw changed my perspective on life. The type of strength needed for that depended mostly on my intellectual skill and I thought I was adept in that aspect. This experience allowed me to

develop a new mental competence which I did not possess before. Determination and perseverance played the chief role in making it to the top which came not from having a muscular body but possessing a tough mind. Being able to learn a lesson and then recall it in an exam has become second nature to me. However, in the same context, climbing a mountain once does not mean climbing it again will be any easier.

The experience has taught me that every task is within one's grasp and as long as you stay focused and strong-minded you will accomplish it. Equally, achieving such a challenge brings with it a feeling of satisfaction that is greater than any monetary or quantitative reward academic success could bring.