

Climbing the Aconcagua: a tale of resilience and friendship

By Sophie Braccini



From left, Ethan Mark and Mylan Jarett recently reach the top of the Aconcagua. Photo provided

The story of the Aconcagua climb by Mylan Jarett and Ethan Mark is one of adventure, extreme mountaineering and courage, but it is also the tale of a friendship that has endured since these two first met over 10 years ago at Stanley Middle School, punctuated by multiple challenges the two have faced together or with the other's support.

The Aconcagua, with its 22,000 feet, is the highest mountain outside of Asia. The normal route is not known for its difficult technicality – some people use crampons, others do not – but every year the mountain claims the lives of several climbers due to the extreme weather conditions or exhaustion caused by oxygen depletion. The success rate is said to be about 30 percent.

Jarett and Mark, now in their mid 20s, live very busy lives, often far away from their hometown of Lafayette. A few days after returning from their climb in December, they were beaming with pride, but the signs of exhaustion still marked their faces.

It took Jarett and Mark 15 days to climb the giant of the Americas. The two climbers were joined by a guide and one Indian policewoman, Radhika, who had previously climbed Mount Everest. Radhika said that the Aconcagua climb was more physically challenging: no oxygen was provided and there is no rope to help. The oxygen level at the top of the Aconcagua is 9 percent versus 21 percent at sea level.

"You can't eat, you can't sleep, you are exhausted and you are sick all the time," remembered Jarett.

"Everything is so grueling," added Mark.

As the climb progressed, the weather worsened, with extreme

cold and winds, while oxygen levels diminished. "But there was no way I was going to get down this mountain with a helicopter," said Jarett, who most suffered from oxygen depletion sickness.

The two adventurers say that the climb had been planned carefully with Argentinian guide Lucas Dauria, with days of rest interspersed to acclimate to the change in air composition. Despite the hardship, the two men's good humor never left. "We would burst into laughter as one would stop exhausted after trying to put on one sleeve of his jacket," Mark remembered.

One day as Jarett was fighting oxygen depletion sickness in the camp, his partners dragged him out of his tent and explained that the weather had worsened and that they had to forfeit the day of rest and needed to immediately leave camp if they were to ever complete the adventure. When Jarett realized it was a joke, he laughed in spite of the nausea.

On the last day of the climb they had to leave camp very early to reach the summit because they only had 10 hours for the ascent and needed enough time to return to the last camp before dark. Mark and Jarett left alone; Radhika planned to leave later with the guide. "We thought she would not make it down and would have to be airlifted," said Mark, adding that most of the deadly accidents happen on the way down, since people are exhausted and the last miles are extremely steep. But they said that the feeling of being in heaven when you reach the top makes all the pain worth it.

Jarett remembered how tough his friend was during this final part of the climb. "He would throw up because of the altitude sickness but immediately pick up his pack

and start climbing again," he said. Mark added that they supported each other every step of the way, drawing on their specific strengths. Mark is a long distance runner with extremely strong legs, who paces himself and remains calm, while Jarett is a swimmer and water polo player with excellent lung capacity who often goes all-out.

The Aconcagua is just a step in the life adventures of the two young men. It all started on the tracks at Stanley Middle School where one day they met and started sharing their life dreams. They have been friends ever since.

Their first climb was in their junior year when they climbed Mount Whitney together; the same week Jarett swam across the Bay from Alcatraz. Together they climbed Mount Shasta, Mount Kilimanjaro, rafted the Grand Canyon, completed multiple hikes at Yosemite, and went to less well-known remote, inaccessible spots, sometimes with girlfriends who more or less appreciated the challenges offered by the adventure.

The current quest is to climb the seven highest summits of the five continents, the next possibly Puncak Jaya in Papua New Guinea. Jarett talked with sparking eyes of the less often climbed mountain located deep in the jungle; getting to its base is an adventure in itself. Mount Elbrus in Russia is also a possibility.

The two friends also challenge themselves intellectually. Next year, Jarett expects to be getting his full captaincy for any size commercial ships - he has been a professional sailor on all the oceans of the world for years already, while Mark expects to complete his doctorate in statistics and organ transplant survival, also within a year.

"I definitely think he does crazy things," Mark said of Jarett with a warm smile. He also testified that his friend is very good at making important decisions, taking into account all parameters, and that he loves life.

Jarett thinks that his friend will leave the world a better place with his research and that there is no better partner for any adventure.

Both know that they will always be able to count on each other.

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Call for entries for Lamorinda Arts Council High School Visual Arts Competition

Submitted by Denise Nomura

Lamorinda Arts Council will host its 15th Annual High School Visual Arts Competition from March 1-26 at the Orinda Library Art Gallery. This annual exhibition provides the community a wonderful opportunity to view a wide range of creative, original work by local students and recognizes the region's dedicated high school art teachers.

Entries for the High School Visual Arts Competition are currently being accepted through Feb. 23. The competition is open to ninth through 12th grade students living in or attending public or private high schools in Orinda, Lafayette and Moraga. The competition is also open to all students who attend Acalanes, Campolindo, Las Lo-

mas, and Miramonte high schools, regardless of residence.

Students may submit entries for 2D and 3D artwork as well as for Photography and Digital Design. LAC offers community service hours for the project with school or district approval. The online registration form for entry is available through Feb. 23, closing at midnight that day. The registration form as well as the full details of the competition can be found at www.lamorindaarts.org/vac.

Competition award winners will be announced during a free, public reception from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 7 at the Orinda Library Art Gallery. A panel of arts professionals and educators will judge and award winners.