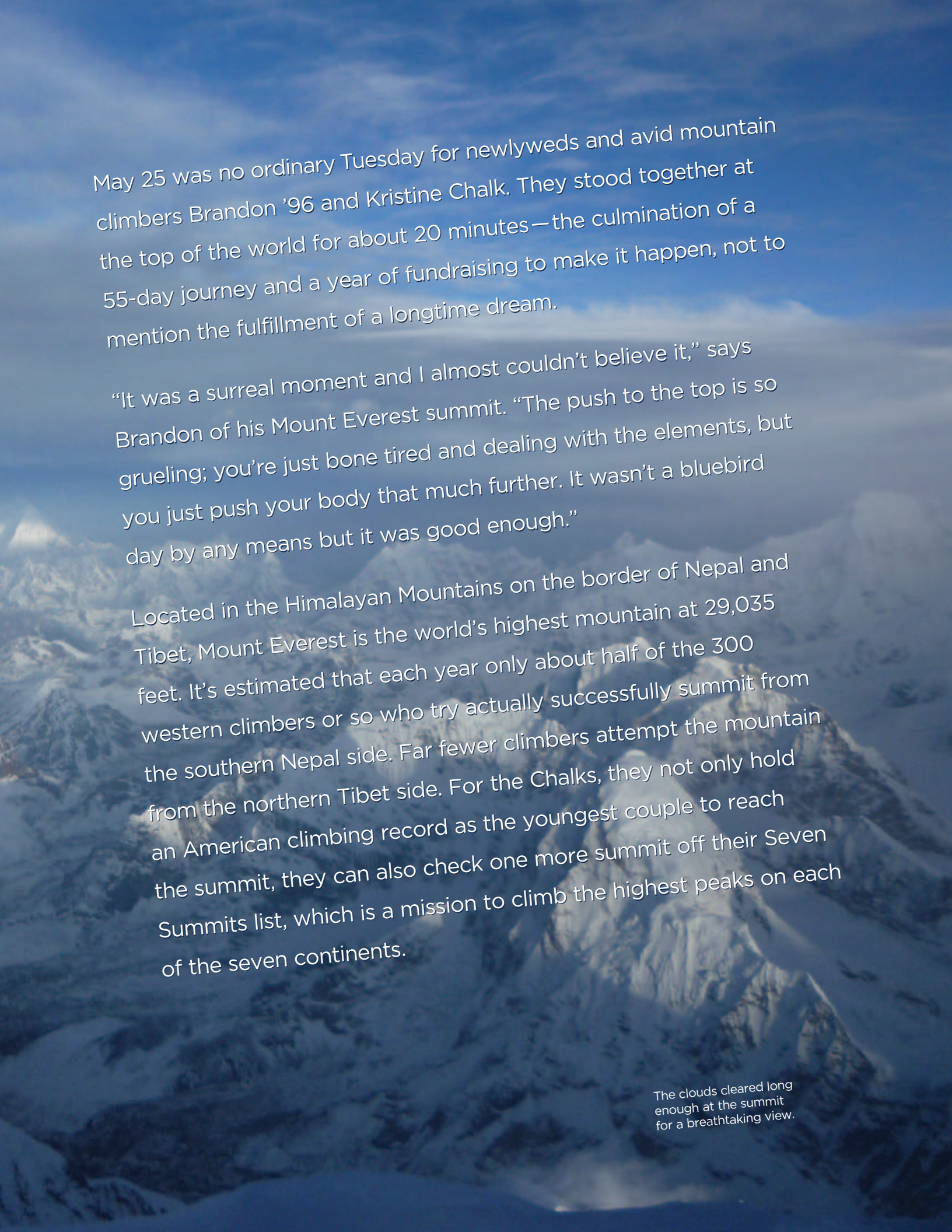




Climb the Highest Mountain

Brandon Chalk '96 and his wife, Kristine, are the youngest American couple to scale Mount Everest

*By Lee-Anne
Black, editor*



May 25 was no ordinary Tuesday for newlyweds and avid mountain climbers Brandon '96 and Kristine Chalk. They stood together at the top of the world for about 20 minutes—the culmination of a 55-day journey and a year of fundraising to make it happen, not to mention the fulfillment of a longtime dream.

“It was a surreal moment and I almost couldn’t believe it,” says Brandon of his Mount Everest summit. “The push to the top is so grueling; you’re just bone tired and dealing with the elements, but you just push your body that much further. It wasn’t a bluebird day by any means but it was good enough.”

Located in the Himalayan Mountains on the border of Nepal and Tibet, Mount Everest is the world’s highest mountain at 29,035 feet. It’s estimated that each year only about half of the 300 western climbers or so who try actually successfully summit from the southern Nepal side. Far fewer climbers attempt the mountain from the northern Tibet side. For the Chalks, they not only hold an American climbing record as the youngest couple to reach the summit, they can also check one more summit off their Seven Summits list, which is a mission to climb the highest peaks on each of the seven continents.

The clouds cleared long enough at the summit for a breathtaking view.

Brandon's love of the outdoors began in middle school when his father started taking him out west for hiking and climbing trips in Grand Teton National Park. In between, he often headed to the Appalachian Mountains for weekend adventures with some of his CCDS friends. He continued outdoor pursuits while earning a degree in engineering from Washington & Lee University, and spent a year in Telluride, Colorado, after graduation to focus on skiing and mountaineering. After completing his master's in engineering at Georgia Tech in 2002, Brandon joined Beaudin Ganze Consulting Engineers in Vail, where he continues to work.

Brandon and Kristine, an elementary school teacher, met through their mutual love of mountain climbing and they have tackled many challenging peaks together in the Rockies, as well as Mount McKinley (Denali) in Alaska, Mount Elbrus in Russia, and Mont Blanc in the Swiss Alps. They spent this past Christmas in Ecuador climbing volcanoes and are planning a 2011 summer trip with 20 friends to Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa.

The Mount Everest climb took considerable fundraising and planning to attempt. Married in October 2009, the couple combined their cash wedding gifts with savings, fundraisers, and corporate sponsorships to raise the \$50,000 necessary for their unguided,



Brandon and Kristine at 24,000 feet, the peak of Mount Everest behind them.

yet fully supported climb—permits alone are \$10,000 apiece. They also arranged for a two-month's leave of absence from their jobs, since tackling Mount Everest also takes time.

Weather-wise spring is the best time to attempt Mount Everest, so the Chalks headed to Kathmandu in late March. It took over a week of trekking to reach base camp at 17,500 feet, where they stayed for another week to acclimate their bodies to the higher altitudes. Basically the body needs to build red blood cells so it can carry more oxygen as the air thins out with increasing altitude. At each successive camp, all the way up to the high camp at 26,300 feet, time is needed for the body to acclimate itself for the next push.

"We have done a lot of tough climbs, so physically we were ready for this," says Brandon, "but mentally, it's tough. A lot of patience is required. We would take day hikes up to 19,000 feet around base camp to kill time, but basically you're still just waiting and not making any progress for two plus weeks at a time. You're waiting for your body to adjust, you're waiting for the right weather window to proceed, and you're waiting for other climbers to go in front of you. It's a lot of waiting."

Some bouts with upset stomachs also tested the couple as they had to adjust to native foods like fried yak. Base camp and camp 2 meals were prepared by the sherpas, who are locals who primarily work at the lower camps and support climbers by helping to ferry gear up the mountain as well as climb with them on summit day.

"Fortunately even though Kristine and I had some bad days, either because we were sick or fatigued or mentally exhausted, our individual bad days never coincided so we could bolster each other up," says Brandon.

Finally, their patience paid off. After having to turn back the previous day due to blizzard conditions and climbing for seven hours through the night, Brandon reached the top of Mount Everest at 6 am on May 25. In addition to taking in the views, celebrating with

Brandon and Kristine at the summit of Mount Everest (29,035 feet).



Kristine, and taking off his oxygen mask for a minute, Brandon made a satellite phone call to his Dad, the person who introduced him to his passion. "It was very special for both of us," he says.

What's next for Brandon and Kristine? After completing Kilimanjaro this summer, Brandon will have completed five of the Seven Summits and Kristine four. Eventually they would like to climb Aconcagua in Argentina together, which Brandon has already climbed. Mount Vinson, in Antarctica, which is even costlier than Mount Everest to undertake, is a distant dream.

"For us though, it's less about checking mountains off a list and more about seeing some special places on the planet," says Brandon.

The Chalks have also been sharing their experiences with others. They have done slideshow presentations about their trip at Kristine's school, and for groups in Vail and in Charlotte who supported their venture. "Everest was indeed the trip of a lifetime and was such an amazing experience primarily because Kristine and I did it together," says Brandon. "We were there for each other the entire time and realize we each contributed to the other's success in this way."

To see more photos and details about their amazing climb, visit their web site: brandonandkristine.org.