

Edwards couple summits EVEREST

Locals become the youngest American couple to reach the top of the world

By Lauren Glendenning
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EDWARDS — Brandon and Kristine Chalk have been climbing mountains for years, but nothing could have totally prepared them for the biggest mountain of them all — Mount Everest.

Last month, the Chalks, who live in Edwards, became the youngest American couple to summit Everest, according to the Himalayan database that keeps those kinds of records. Brandon is 32 and Kristine is 31.

They prepared for months, and essentially years, for Everest — the world's highest mountain located in the Himalayan Mountains near the border of Nepal and Tibet. Everest's peak is 29,035 feet above sea level — more than double the size of Colorado's tallest 14,000-foot peaks.

Everest is just one more notch on their belts, though. The couple is on a mission to climb the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each of the seven continents. Everest marked the third of the Seven Summits the couple has climbed together, and it's the fourth that Brandon has climbed of the seven.

They plan to climb Aconcagua in Argentina this coming winter so Kristine can catch up to Brandon — it will be his second time climbing that one. Plans for Kilimanjaro in Africa are already in the works for the summer of 2011.

"I'm not sure when we'll get enough funds/sponsorships to go to Antarctica to climb Mount Vinson," Brandon said.

A physical and mental endurance test

Climbing Everest isn't something people just decide to do with little planning or notice. The amount of time and money it takes to do the trip is enough to deter many climbers, but not the Chalks.

They realized their journey to the top of the world would cost thousands of dollars, but they wanted to give it their best shot and see if they could make it work.

Through cash wedding presents from their October 2009 wedding, fundraisers, sponsorships, savings and donations, the Chalks got enough money and time off from work together to commit to the trip.

The permits alone to climb Everest were \$10,000 each — nearly half of the cost of the roughly \$50,000 trip.

"We almost didn't do it, but who knows if you'll ever have the chance to do it again," Brandon said. "When are you really going to take two months off and go?"

The climb wasn't just a test of their motivation or endurance, it was also a test for their relationship. The trip was 60 days in total, full of both mentally and physically stressful times.

"If we can survive this in our first year of marriage, then we can survive anything," Kristine said.

It was the support they found through each other that kept them going during the most difficult times, she said. When one of them would have an off day, the other would lift their spirits and help keep a positive attitude.

"Some days you're just like, 'Forget it,'" Kristine said. "It was so helpful to have each other."



TOP RIGHT: Brandon and Kristine Chalk on the summit of Mount Everest, 29,035 feet above sea level, on May 25.

MIDDLE: Kristine and Brandon Chalk at low camp three, more than 23,000 feet above sea level, with Everest in the background.

BOTTOM: The view from above a deep crevasse on Brandon and Kristine Chalk's second time trekking through the Khumbu Icefall on their route to the summit of Mount Everest.



Meet the Chalks:

Brandon and Kristine Chalk are presenting a slideshow of their Mount Everest climb June 25 at 5:30 p.m. at the Alpine Art Center in Edwards. The couple will also talk about their journey and answer questions people may have. You can also check out their website and blog for more of their story at www.brandonandkristine.org.

60 days of Everest

Most mountaineers know that Mount Everest is a serious undertaking, but even experienced climbers such as Brandon and Kristine found plenty of surprises along the way.

They chose to do the trip without a guide, although sherpas helped them a lot throughout the journey. Sherpas are locals who help climbers along the way, either by cooking for them or carrying extra oxygen all the way to the summit, among many other duties. The sherpas are provided with the \$10,000 permit fee for the climb.

Kristine said she couldn't believe the amount of support the sherpas provided.

"Without the sherpas, you couldn't do it," she said.

Sixty days might seem like a long time to spend in order to summit a mountain, but the time is hardly wasted.

It took the Chalks seven or eight days just to trek into base camp, which sits at a mere 17,000 feet. They spent about a week there before doing several round-trip climbs up Mount Everest to other camps.

Camp one on the South Col/Southeast Ridge route is at 19,500 feet; camp two is 21,000 feet and camp three is 23,500. Camp four, the last camp on the way to the summit, sits at about 26,300 feet.

All of the treks up and down the mountain in order to acclimate to the increasing altitudes started to wear the Chalks down before they were even close to the summit.

"It's so mental," Brandon said. "It takes lots of patience."

Kristine said all of the waiting — waiting for the right weather, the time it takes to acclimate, time for other climbers to go in front of you — was one of the more frustrating things about the climb.

"I don't think anyone could warn us enough about the waiting," Kristine said.

On May 25, a day after trying to summit but turning around because of blizzard conditions, Brandon and Kristine summited Everest. All of the months of planning and patience had finally paid off.

"It was surreal," Kristine said.

It took about seven hours to get to the top, at 29,035 feet, from the 26,300-foot camp below. Once they were up there, they took in the views and as much oxygen as they could, and headed back down after about 20 minutes.

"You're not really with it because you're so tired," Kristine said.

"The day after, you just think, 'Did I dream that?'" Brandon said.

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