

A Survivor's Tale: Life's mountains climbed step at a time

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Mike Ketchel (left) and son John rest after hiking to the top of Mount Diablo. Seeing the mountain in the distance as he recovered from a stroke became motivation for Mike Ketchel to make hiking to the top of the mountain a goal.

I woke at 6:30 a.m. Nov. 19, 2011, and tried to take the first steps of the day. Instead, I felt my body suddenly list to the right and, as a tree suddenly toppled, I fell facedown.

The next few moments were a "reality check." The first impulse was to simply stand up, except I couldn't get anywhere, because the right half of my body was paralyzed.

I managed to turn onto my left side and surmised that I had suffered a stroke. With some effort I crawled to reach my mobile phone and a rescue team arrived in minutes.

The next few weeks flew by in a blur. I was bedbound. Speech was a nightmare and writing impossible. I learned my renal function, which already had been compromised due to combination of hypertension, hypertension drugs, and long-term nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs due to athletic injuries, had diminished after the stroke. My nephrologists, Drs. Jagjit Singh and Randeep Bajwa, felt that dialysis was necessary. Meantime, my cardiologist, Dr. Surrender Raina, explained that atrial fibrillation was the source of the stroke and that one of my arteries was found to be 75 percent closed. Stents and angioplasty would follow my hospital release.

Nearly a month was spent at St. Joseph Medical Center's intensive care unit. During my hospitalization, I struggled to walk, write, spell, and talk again. I wasn't aware that I was dying initially – my chart notes my condition was "moribund" – but I knew that I had the will to live. I had faith that God wasn't through with me yet. In my heart I had faith, because I had hope.

And I saw victories in the smallest progress. Clutching a walker and taking unsteady steps was a victory, as was it a victory to complete a single lap around the ward. Being able to recite the alphabet was a triumph, as were learning the months of the year and learning to walk without assistance.

The months that followed involved a time of continued life transitions. As I recovered my faculties slowly, one of my personal missions was to walk. There was a familiar course where I have logged many miles. My walks

went from around a block, to a mile, three miles, 10 miles, and more. As I walked and continued to build my strength, each day I saw Mount Diablo in the distance rising nearly 4,000 feet above sea level. Mount Diablo became a symbol to me – a challenge. I pledged that within six months from that point as we rolled into 2012, I would conquer that mountain.

After my hospital release I quickly became acclimated to my dialysis treatments having been introduced to the team at Satellite Dialysis in Stockton. I initially faced dialysis with the apprehension that someone feels as they are about to pass through a door that marks a very new chapter. Satellite's staff social worker Lashone Brown, knowing that it is not an easy climb to make alone, helped me make a smooth transition. The entire staff has created a supportive, upbeat atmosphere so critical in my recovery and ongoing treatment. That positive environment certainly carries over into my daily life. I can understand that some dialysis patients feel at their best while in treatment because of the kindness, compassion and genuine caring they find among the staff, sometimes beyond what some feel within their families. Imagine the mountains faced by those without any support system.

The Mount Diablo climb was set for June 17, a week before Father's Day. That day arrived quickly. I was joined by my 14-year-old son, John, and his 21-year-old cousin, Shane. We drove to the Mitchell Canyon Trail and started the 7.6-mile trek up Mount Diablo, each carrying fluids, Power Bars, and snacks. Ironically, it was the early sections that were the toughest, as evidenced by my hourly blood pressure and heart rate measurements. Make no mistake about it – Mount Diablo is a formidable mountain.

I had been reading a story by Minister Joel Osteen. He described a Colorado mountain trek that he had attempted. He felt exhausted and was doubtful he could finish. An older hiker, returning from the summit, saw him and said, "You're closer than you think." Osteen pressed on with renewed energy and he soon reached the summit. I relayed that story to the boys, that life will throw challenges at us and sometimes we may be tempted to give up when we're almost there. The theme for the day became "Don't quit. You're closer than you think. You're almost there."

We stood atop Mount Diablo by noon that day. After a small respite, our most difficult time of the day lay ahead. We still had to descend safely and the route down was a different and more difficult route. The steep trail surface was covered with loose rocks and shale, making for dangerous footing. Despite a few near falls, we reached the car at 4:30 p.m. after nearly 15 miles up and back, spent and sore, but triumphant.

Reaching the Mount Diablo summit was only possible because I had willed myself to take that first step. Life's challenges may seem insurmountable, like mountains in the distance, until the first steps are taken. Mountains are climbed one step at a time, fueled by hope, faith, and will power.

Thanks to my team at Satellite Dialysis and my physicians for encouraging me to press on. As I stand on every mountain top, I am aware that I've been given a new life and that in itself has been the greatest gift of all. In a very large way, the technicians, nurses, administrators and doctors climbed that mountain with me. With each step I could hear them all encouraging me to keep going. "Don't quit. You're closer than you think."

The author, a Stockton resident and former small business owner, is an athlete, coach, public speaker, writer and actor. He continues to recover from his stroke. Visit mikeketchel.hubpages.com to read more about him. Email him at mikeketchel@gmail.com.