

# Sports Barrel

## Purvis heads to Kilimanjaro

by Aleesha Towns

### Local teaching Wilderness First Aid to African guides

Imagine the worst-case scenario at 18,000 feet. You're climbing—it's windy, it's cold—and you're exhibiting all the signs of altitude sickness. As you stumble toward the summit, dazed and dogged in the pursuit of reaching the apex, who's there to stop you from pushing yourself to your untimely death? Your mountain guide may be your last hope, at this point.

But up until very recently on at least one of the world's seven summits very few guides had any first aid training and even fewer were able to recognize the signs of high altitude sicknesses such as high-altitude pulmonary and cerebral edema in climbing clients.

That changed this year when local resident Sue Purvis teamed up with mountaineer Eddie Frank to train guides on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa—the highest mountain on the African continent. Purvis, who owns Crested Butte Outdoors, teaches Wilderness First Responder classes—a course designed to equip people who spend time in the outdoors with basic medical skills.

Now Purvis is taking her knowledge to Africa for the second time this year to train guides from Frank's Lake Tahoe-based Company, Tusker Trail. On Wednesday, November 17, Purvis left Crested Butte for Moshi, Tanzania—a town that acts as a base camp for the 25,000 people who climb the 19,340-foot Mt. Kilimanjaro each year, thousands of porters and up to 5,000 mountain guides.

Frank, who was in Crested Butte to update his Wilderness First Responder training with Purvis last week, says the Tanzanian government does not require mountain guides to have any formal medical training and most guides are shy about turning back European and American climbers from the summit—even sick ones.

That's why he convinced Purvis to come to Africa to teach a Wilderness First Responder course to his 20 English-speaking guides. The first class was held in February 2004. Frank, who was raised in Africa, says he started the courses "to save my clients' lives, for starters." Up to 25 climbers die of altitude sickness on Mt. Kilimanjaro each year during the two climbing seasons, from the end of May to the end of September and December to January.

"All these deaths could be avoided if people could recognize the signs," Purvis says, who climbed to the summit of Kilimanjaro last February.

In fact, Mt. Kilimanjaro can be quite dangerous. At more than 18,000 feet, its summit is considered to be extreme altitude—the highest level that human beings can climb into—and can be life-threatening. According to Frank, some guides and clients don't recognize the danger and it often comes



Sue Purvis

"I need to teach them about urine output," Purvis says and notes the importance of urine in assessing how well the body is functioning. "Specifically, how recent and what color," Frank adds.

"Can you imagine this cultural conflict?" Purvis says with a laugh.

Even with some misunderstandings between teacher and students, Frank and Purvis agree that the first class in February was a success. Guides are now more active in monitoring the well-being of each other, clients and also the porters that carry the hundreds of pounds of goods up the mountain—many of the porters ascend the mountain wearing tennis shoes and jeans.

This year, Purvis contacted Marmot, who agreed to donate seconds or clothing with slight flaws to the porters on Kilimanjaro.

In another testimony of the program's success, a doctor from the Tanzanian health ministry attended the course in February and is now joining Frank in petitioning the government to require Mt. Kilimanjaro guides to take a first aid course in order to be licensed. The medical information could also be taken back and shared amongst people from the guides' towns and villages.

According to Frank, his trained guides are now so well respected that they are often called to assist in emergencies with other climbers on the mountain. The experience has been so rewarding that the two are considering starting a wilderness medical institute in Moshi. "It's been beyond my wildest dreams," Frank says.

back to bite them. "As they say in Africa, you met your cleverness around the corner," Frank says.

This year, Purvis took Frank up on his offer to teach in Tanzania, because she says she thought it would be a unique experience. "What a great challenge to go to another country to teach what I know—to share the information," she says.

The biggest challenge on her last trip, Purvis says, was to overcome some cultural obstacles. African men are sometimes unaccustomed to being taught by a woman, she explains. Also, the subject matter can seem inappropriate to the guides.