

60-year-old Ann Arbor man battles stinging wind, altitude sickness to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro

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David Keren stands at the peak of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania on Feb. 8. Instead of the blue skies that a friend in a previous climb had described, Keren was met at the summit by a wind so cold "it felt like wasps stinging your face."

Ann Arbor resident David Keren balked upon first hearing about a friend's climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania at age 60.

"He told me it was something I should consider," Keren said. "I thought he was nuts." A year later, the 61-year-old pathologist is the one fielding questions about his sanity after reaching the 19,340-foot peak on Feb. 8.

Keren, a pathologist who directs Warde Medical Laboratory and teaches residents at the University of Michigan and Henry Ford hospitals, was the oldest member of a 10-person group organized by the University of Illinois Alumni Association.

Kilimanjaro is not a technical climb that requires ropes, and thousands do it each year.

At the same time, it's not exactly for the faint of heart.

"When I read the itinerary more carefully, it was a little scary because there are places you have to sign where you agree that this could cause your death," Keren said. "The lead guide wrote that I needed to be able to hike at least eight hours consecutively on two days and suggested I work on it on my weekends."

Keren began last August by walking for one hour at Gallup Park and by December, had worked his way up to hiking 9.5 straight hours and covering 20 miles with a backpack. He then added climbing the 130 steps at the U-M Hospital heliport 20 times to his routine.

Keren's tour took a little-used route that begins near the Kenyan border, which meant there wasn't much traffic for the first half of his group's climb.

"The climbing the first four days was beautiful," Keren said. "You're climbing through the jungle, seeing flowers and plants that you've never seen, that don't exist anywhere else in the world. It's absolutely gorgeous."

The toughest part of the ascent, by far, was the summit climb, which began at midnight of the fifth day after just two to three hours of sleep.

Ideally, Keren says, climbers are recommended to scale 1,000 vertical feet per day, but his group went from 15,500 feet to the 19,340-foot summit, reaching the Kibo peak at 7:30 a.m.

"When you're that high on a mountain, the physiology is such that there is less than half the oxygen we have at sea level when you breathe in," Keren said. "So you have to exert much more just to breathe and while you're doing that, you're climbing. The angle that you're climbing at on that summit day is almost 70 degrees in some parts."

By the end, Keren was on all fours climbing over rocks, but when he reached the peak, he wasn't greeted by the same blue skies his friend was.

"There was a blizzard that day," Keren said. "The wind was so cold when we got to the top. It was so cold it felt like wasps stinging your face."

The air was so thin at the top, Keren spent just enough time to take a picture before heading back down.

Until his descent, Keren says, his only symptom of altitude sickness, which can be fatal, was loss of appetite.

About 18,000 feet up, Keren noticed pieces of aluminum foil strewn about the trail and, being a self-described "Ann Arbor green-type," was incensed that people would litter in such a beautiful place.

It wasn't until he spoke of it to his guide that he realized how severe his altitude sickness was.

"He looked at me and said, 'Dave, that's ice,' " Keren said. "I had a hallucination. That shocked me. And what that means is that you need to get down, the sooner the better, because you have altitude sickness."

At the end of the 15-hour day, Keren found himself back at 12,200 feet above sea level and a few days later, met his wife at the base of the mountain for a week-long safari.

Keren says the trip is well worth it, but recommends a rigorous training program similar to his, as well as shopping around for a tour that goes at a slower pace.

"I like doing physical things, but I doubt I'm going to climb any more mountains like Kilimanjaro," Keren said. "I will do other trekking. I did some before and it did inspire me to do a little more."

David Keren

Age: 61.

Occupation: Pathologist and director of Warde Medical Laboratory. Also teaches residents at the University of Michigan and Henry Ford hospitals.

Education: B.A. in Biology in 1969 and medical degree in 1971, both from the University of Illinois.

Recent achievement: Reached the 19,340-foot summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, the only mountain he has climbed, on Feb. 8.

Recommendations: Climbing Kilimanjaro is for the physically fit and those willing to train. "If you're

used to running five miles, five miles is nothing," Keren said. "You've got to be used to walking for seven, eight, nine, 10 hours in order to deal with that summit day walk."

Favorite ways to stay

active: Running, trekking, swimming and scuba diving.

Hobbies: Community theater.

Personal: Has lived in Ann Arbor since 1978. He is married to Mary Keren and has two children, Phil Keren and Liz Kold, and four grandchildren.