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## Joe Henderson: Tampa attorney and son share memorable trip up Mt. Kilimanjaro

Jim Lake and his son Thomas began preparations months ago for the father-son quest to conquer Kilimanjaro.



Thomas (left) and Jim Lake after reaching the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. [Photo courtesy of Jim Lake]

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Jim Lake might have believed he had completed the adventure of a lifetime when he returned home 15 years ago after climbing to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

One and done, right? That's what he thought.

His son Thomas, who was four years old at the time, had other ideas. Thomas told his father he wanted to climb the mountain, too. So Jim promised young Thomas that when he was old enough, they would do it together.

“Fifteen years later, it was time to do it,” Jim said.

At 7:30 a.m. on July 4, after 5 ½ days of ascending the world’s tallest free-standing mountain, the pair reached the Uhuru Peak at the summit — 19,341 feet above sea level. The guides timed the final stretch of the trek to hit the peak just as the sun was rising.

“It was spectacular,” Jim said. “It was awe-inspiring, and a wonderful moment to be there with Thomas.”

Uhuru, by the way, means freedom in Swahili.

Jim Lake is an attorney with the Tampa business law firm Thomas & Locicero. His son is a student at Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn. Thomas wants to start a church and pastor it upon graduation.

The quest for the father-son team to conquer Kilimanjaro began months ago. One doesn’t just load up a backpack and head up the trails of the highest mountain peak in Africa.

“I lost 20 pounds since Christmas,” Jim said. “I started running, but there’s only so much you can do at sea level. Stair-climbers don’t exactly prepare you for something like this.”

At least Jim had experience. This was all new to Thomas.

“I had done some day hikes and things like that, but nothing like this,” he said. “I didn’t know what to expect.”

Professionals say Kilimanjaro is considered a hiking peak instead of climbing. It’s not like scaling El Capitan or something like that. Participants don’t need equipment like ropes or ice axes. What they do need are endurance and patience.

The guides have a saying in Swahili: “Pole! Pole!”

It means “go slow.”

They ascended in groups of eight, starting their daily treks at about 6:30 a.m. with breakfast. Nearly everything needed for the adventure is provided by the guides and their helpers. They carry tents, equipment, and prepare three meals per day.

The only thing the hikers carry is their backpack.

The higher they go, the thinner the oxygen becomes. That’s one reason that by the end of each day, guides lead their groups down the mountain for a bit to give their bodies time to re-acclimate to the thinner air.

The final day involved an ascent of about 3,400 feet to the summit. It began at around midnight, with the temperature a brisk 19 degrees. Each participant wore lighted headgear to show the way. Ahead, they could see the lights of other groups, as well as those coming up behind.

The final trip took about seven hours. But what a payoff! Looking down on the world from a peak nearly four miles high as the sun rises can fill a person with an overwhelming sense of awe.

“It was a very spiritual moment,” Thomas said. “You’re so small compared to the world, but then you think that God took the time to create and love you. I felt my heart pounding in my chest.

“This was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I was exhausted when it was over, but it was worth it.”

And for Jim, the promise kept to his son was worth the effort it took to complete a second trip up Kilimanjaro.

“I’m really blessed,” he said. “We’ve always had a great relationship, but this was such a special time for us to be together like this. It was just a wonderful moment, not only to be at the summit but to be there with Thomas.”

*Contact Joe Henderson at [JoeHTampa@gmail.com](mailto:JoeHTampa@gmail.com)*