



Peak experience

Three alumni prepare for the journey of a lifetime

After fighting prostate cancer, Jim Thies has taken on a new challenge: Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Thies '80 (chemistry) is preparing to climb the highest peak in Africa next February as part of a program called Journeys of Inspiration. Joining him are Mark Biscone '99 (biochemistry) and Jack Lewis '81 (chemistry).

"The hike is going to be great," says Thies. "But getting together with the people involved in this has been amazing. It's been a really rich experience."

The "Kili Cancer Climb" is being organized as a fund-raiser for the American Cancer Society by Pack Paddle Ski, a Rochester-area outdoor adventure travel company (www.packpaddleski.com), in conjunction with the local ACS organization. Three groups will take different routes for the eight-day climb up the 19,340-foot mountain. The goal is to reach the summit together at sunrise on March 2, 2008.

Paraphrasing a fellow climber and cancer survivor, Thies expects "a lot of emotion, a bunch of hugs and probably a few tears as team members meet at the summit."

Each of the 40 participants – cancer survivors and others who have been impacted by the disease – is expected to raise \$2,500 for the ACS in addition to covering individual expenses of \$4,000-plus. Climbers are raising money individually and through group activities – and this effort has forged new and close friendships.

Thies, a retired Kodak chemist, has been working on the project almost every day since he learned about it in November 2006. "I'm hooked," says Thies, who lives in Rochester. "I have the time, so I can be as consumed by this as I want to be. I cannot think of a better way to ease into retirement and at the same time give back to the community while being involved in this inspirational journey."

Thies' enthusiasm motivated Lewis and Biscone to join. The three have hiked together many times since Biscone met the two Kodak veterans when he was on a co-op assignment in their lab. In fact, it was Biscone who first got Thies out on the trail.

"Mark invited me to join his family on

a climb of Mt. Katahdin in Maine," says Thies. He enjoyed the experience so much that he persuaded Lewis to join them on a climb of 6,288-foot Mt. Washington in New Hampshire.

"We didn't make the top due to bad weather," Lewis recalls. But they kept climbing and have since bagged all 46 Adirondack High Peaks, the Presidential Range in New Hampshire and a repeat of the original Mt. Katahdin climb. They were planning a climb of Long's Peak in Colorado for summer 2006 when, in February of that year, Thies broke the news that he had cancer.

"It was a shock, but I told Jim we should go ahead with our plan," says Lewis. After Thies' successful recovery from prostate surgery they were able to celebrate on the 14,300-foot summit on Aug. 8, 2006.

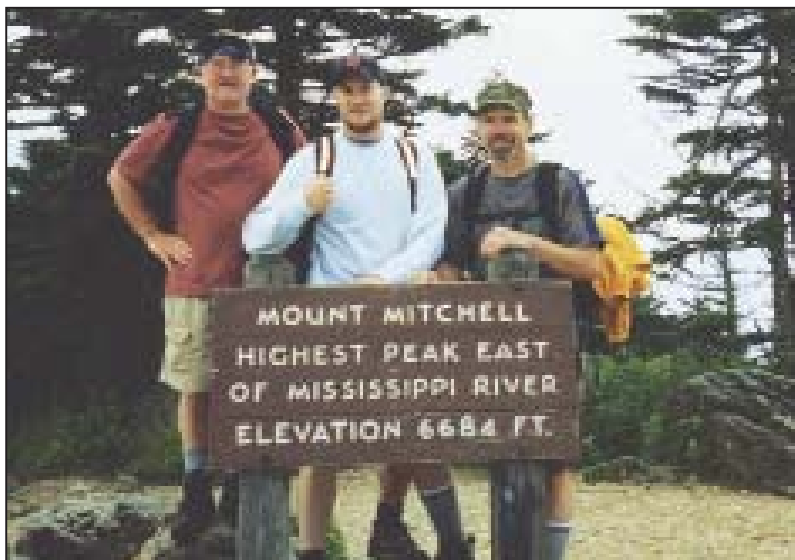
"We always talked about Kilimanjaro being the ultimate, but we never thought it really would be possible," says Lewis, who retired from Kodak and now works as a special education paraprofessional in the Honoeye Falls-Lima (N.Y.) Central School District. "When Jim found out about Journeys of Inspiration, we were among the

first to sign up. I've been on all sorts of teams, but this has been really something because of the people. That's what makes it so worthwhile."

Biscone, probably the most experienced climber of the three, has done several major treks and climbs around the country. Kilimanjaro will be his biggest undertaking to date.

"The Kilimanjaro climb allows me incredible challenges matched with immeasurable rewards," he says. Besides the fundraising component – which is daunting, all three admit – the physical preparation is rigorous. His training regimen includes attention to diet, daily runs and some weight training and biking.

"This climb is not technical but it is long and high," says Biscone. The biggest concern is the altitude sickness, a debilitating condition that affects many people at altitudes above 8,000 feet. They will also



Jim Thies '80, Mark Biscone '99 and Jack Lewis '81 (from left) plan to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in February.

have to adjust to rapid climate change. "It will be summer in Tanzania when we go, so it will be hot at the bottom," says Biscone, "but there will be ice and snow at the top."

Biscone, who lives in Philadelphia, earned a Ph.D. in microbiology from the University of Pennsylvania in 2006, where his research

focused on viruses. In addition to teaching part-time at the university, he has taken on construction jobs and bartending to earn money for the trip. His fraternity, Phi Kappa Psi, is also supporting his effort.

"I've had many family members and close friends stricken with cancer," says Biscone. "I feel profoundly impacted by this disease. This is one way I can help others."

Kathy Lindsley

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send e-mail to jlewis07@rochester.rr.com. To contact Mark Biscone, send e-mail to mark.biscone@gmail.com. To find out more about the project or to make a contribution, go to www.journeysofinspiration.com. For audio and video updates during the climb Feb. 23-March 5, 2008, go to www.pack-paddleski.com.

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