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Climbing The Highest Mountains With MS

By Daniel Casciato



Maggie Schneider is an avid rock climber, skier, biker and camper. She loves the outdoors and nothing prevents her from pursuing an active, adventurous lifestyle. Not even the fact that she has multiple sclerosis. "I was doing the same outdoor activities before I found out that I had MS," says the Valencia resident. "After I was diagnosed, I knew that I had to be proactive and not let it stop me from doing what I enjoy."

Schneider, an academic adviser in the School of Arts & Science at the University of Pittsburgh, was diagnosed with MS in April 1994 after developing a vision impairment. She woke up one morning with blind spots over her eyes and immediately called her ophthalmologist. "It was pretty scary," she recalls. "I was only able to see peripherally. I couldn't see straight ahead." The ophthalmologist suggested Schneider have an MRI and that is when she learned she had MS. She fell into a month-long funk soon after her diagnosis.

"I was very upset," she says. "I shut down emotionally. I was afraid that my entire way of living would change." She says it was difficult for her at first, but her funk didn't last too long. "My husband helped me snap out of it. He pointed out to me that I don't have to stop doing any of my outdoor activities or other things I enjoyed doing. I was the only one who could stop me."

Maggie's husband, Duke Schneider, says he just maintained a positive attitude. "You have to stay positive," he says. "Everyone has trials and tribulations at one time or another. You just need to focus on what you have and always be optimistic." He recommends to those who are living with someone who has MS to always be patient, helpful and encouraging.

On her Web site, Maggie Schneider states that occasionally her MS does slow her down. Although her initial vision impairment has since healed, she continues to experience a constant numbness in her right leg as a result of subsequent MS episodes. She also has to deal with fatigue and headaches usually caused from fluorescent or bright lights. However, with the help of medication, she has been able to slow the progression of her disease and lead a normal life, even attain many of her dreams, such as mountain climbing.

Among the mountains she has climbed are Mount Washington in New Hampshire and Mount Popocatepetl in Mexico. One of her greatest accomplishments came last year when she trekked 17,500 feet to the base camp of the world's highest mountain, Mt. Everest. She says she wanted to show others who have MS that they too could set goals and achieve them.

Schneider designed a challenging training regimen to prepare herself for the climb. Her routine included lifting weights three times per week, swimming 20 laps twice per week, and walking the 37 flights of stairs in the Cathedral of Learning on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh twice per week.

"MS can affect people differently," says Duke Schneider. "We've been lucky that it hasn't had a major effect on her. I think it's actually made her more aggressive in trying to accomplish as much as she can."

One of Maggie's goals is to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. "That would be fun," she says. "After I do that, I'll see if I can set another goal. I also hope to climb the Wind River Range in Wyoming."

This summer the Schneiders are traveling to Russia with four other people to climb Mt. Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe at 18,481 feet. "It's exhilarating," she explains when asked why she mountain climbs. "I love the view at the summit of the mountain and I like the accomplishment of climbing one. It's a great feeling." Her husband feels the same way. "You can define us as risk-takers," he stated. "We enjoy activities like that because it's always challenging."

MultipleSclerosis.com describes MS as a chronic and unpredictable disease of the central nervous system that produces mental and physical symptoms that may relapse, remit and/or worsen over time.

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, approximately 400,000 Americans have MS, while worldwide, it affects 2.5 million people. Most people with MS are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50, and 73 percent of those are women.

Maggie says she tries not to let MS change her life. "I'm coming to realize that the only thing changing is that I'm becoming more of a spokesperson," she says. "I think it's important that you keep fighting. If you don't face the mountain, you won't get to the top."

For more information on Maggie Schneider and her battle against MS, visit her Web site at www.pitt.edu/~schneid/. For more information on MS, visit the National Multiple Sclerosis Society Web site at www.nationalmssociety.org.

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