

at her peak

Alison Levine, 41, the team captain of the first American

women's Everest expedition, has climbed the highest peak on each continent and skied 100 miles across the Arctic Circle to the North Pole. As if that weren't achievement enough, Levine founded the Climb High Foundation (climbhighfoundation.org), a nonprofit that trains jobless women in Africa to be mountain guides, and Daredevil Strategies, a leadership consultancy teaching how the tactics she learned in mountain climbing apply to the business world. Previously Levine spent 11 years in the healthcare industry in the U.S. and Asia, worked for Goldman Sachs and served as deputy finance director for Arnold Schwarzenegger's first successful California gubernatorial campaign. Levine tells PINK what it's like at the top (and we mean *top*).

NEW HEIGHTS: "I was born with a heart condition that kept me from doing basic things like driving or even walking up stairs. It took two surgeries to fix it. To celebrate my new good health, before I started the MBA program [at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business], I took a month off to climb Kilimanjaro. Every break in business school, I used frequent flier miles to climb the world without spending money."

LESSONS: "[In the mountains] I learned how to evaluate risks. The Khumbu Icefall, where most accidents occur on Everest, is 2,000 vertical feet of moving ice chunks the size of school buses. At one point, 10,000 tons of ice collapsed behind us. The icefall is in constant motion, so staying still is dangerous. Same thing in the business world: If you get overwhelmed and do nothing, you'll fail."

GIVING BACK: "When I went to western Uganda in 2005 to climb the Rwenzori Mountains, I learned that women did all the physical labor in the community but weren't allowed in the mountains. It was taboo. But trekking guides and porters were the only ones in town who made money. This seemed so wrong to me. I explained to the village head the benefits to the community of women working. I volunteered to train the women and got them hired with a local guiding service. The men didn't believe any women would want to learn, but seven showed up. Since then, I've trained 44 more!"

SUCCESS SECRET: "Having a very high tolerance for pain – emotional and physical – and keeping things in perspective. Pain and discomfort are temporary. My oxygen tank once stopped working at about 28,000 feet. If we hadn't been able to fix it, I might not have made it back. There's obviously a reason I'm still here, so I need to use this time to make a positive impact. Not much can rattle me now. Nothing short of death is a big deal." ❧

AS TOLD TO TAYLOR MALLORY

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