Trekking to newer heights

SMU’s Dare to Dream project conquered more than just Mount Kilimanjaro, JENNANI DURAI finds out

Last month, eighteen undergraduates from Singapore Management University (SMU) successfully reached the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. But what made this group of students different from other thrill-seekers was that with them on their expedition were five youths-at-risk who reside in a home for juvenile offenders.

These students were part of SMU’s Dare to Dream project, a yearly initiative by the Office of Student Life at SMU to give students the opportunity to lead outdoor programmes with some element of community involvement.

Whereas previous years’ expeditions had scaled Mount Kinabalu with Special Olympics students or kayaked in conjunction with the Yellow Ribbon project, this year’s team set their sights on something much loftier – scaling Africa’s highest peak.

But it was not without trepidation. “We had quite a few people on our team who had never trekked before, so trying to climb a mountain that is 5,895 metres high on your first expedition is quite scary,” said Denise Lim, 19. She added: “We especially feared for the boys, because they were relatively young aged between 16 and 19.”

Although none of the boys made it all the way to the summit, the team feels that they still gained a lot from the trek. “They have surpassed anything they’ve ever done before,” said expedition leader Melvin Phang, 24.

The team chose the tougher Machame route to scale Mount Kilimanjaro, which they described as “not the usual tourist route”.

“There were no buses along the way, unlike the Marangu trail, which is the one most tourists prefer to go on. We pitched our own tents,” explained Mr Phang.

They started their trek at 1,700 metres above sea level, and trekked for two days uneventfully before Acute Mountain Syndrome (AMS) struck. It was then, at an altitude of more than 3,800 metres, that the first of the boys had to descend due to breathing problems.

Shortly after, another of the boys fainted, and two others followed. The team described the day as the lowest point in their journey, with everyone feeling ill and demoralised.

“We started thinking it might be a trap, so of course we wanted everyone to reach the summit as a team. When the time came that one of us couldn’t make it, it hit one of the SMU students or one of the boys, it became very emotional,” said Mr Phang.

The team had a meeting that night to air their disappointment, and they concluded that the rest had to make it to the top more than ever now — for the boys who had to descend.

**Highest point**

With a fresh resolve, the team continued, and began the final stretch — the push to the summit — on day five of the expedition. Starting the hike at 10pm, all 18 of them reached Gillman Point at about 5am. This is the second highest point on Mount Kilimanjaro, and hikers who reach this point are considered to have reached the summit.

Five students had to turn back at that point, due to hypothermia and sheer exhaustion.

“We were all falling asleep by that point,” recounted Ms Lim. She added: “You had to force yourself to breathe by counting, or you would stop.”

The remaining 13 carried on and reached Uhuru Peak, the highest point on Mount Kilimanjaro.

After returning to Singapore, the team still kept in contact with the boys they brought on the expedition.

“I think the friendship will carry on because we bonded so strongly during the trek,” said Ryan Chua, 24.

They all noted a marked change in the boys, who were previously very shy and stuck to themselves. Mr Phang said: “It was hard to break the ice at first, especially because we are university students, so our lives are very different from theirs. They probably thought that we saw them as being different from us.”

But the expedition changed all that.

“During the trek, we could really see them looking out for each other and looking out for us as well. It was a really big change for them.”

SMU students from feeling like part of our project to becoming part of our team,” said Charmian Kok, 19.

Chai Wei Zhe, 22, said: “Now they see us differently — as friends. A different set of friends from what they usually have, but still friends. They turn to us for help.”

The experience clearly made an impact on each of the SMU students as well. “I’ve never climbed a mountain in my life, and I never thought I would,” said Ms Kok.

Mr Chai added: “When you’re a student in Singapore, you get used to Singapore after a while. Going to Africa is really different. You experience things that are totally different and get a new perspective on life.”

Mr Chua put into words the general sentiment of the group: “I thought Mount Kilimanjaro would be this once-in-a-lifetime event, the biggest thing I’ll ever do.”

“But after climbing it, I feel like I’m going to do bigger things — this is only the beginning.”