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Up and back

Laurie Bagley survives the 'death zone' to scale Mount Everest - and will never be the same

By Suzanne Hurt -- Special To The Bee

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Laurie Bagley relaxes with her daughter, 9-year-old Auriel Karseboom, in their home in late July. Bagley didn't see her daughter for two months as she prepared to climb Mount Everest in May. She says the mountain showed her that all things are possible in her life if she sets small goals and takes small steps toward them. Sacramento Bee/Randy Pench

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On the summit of Mount Everest, Laurie Bagley could see forever: more than 100 miles of the Himalayas sweeping out in all directions.

The only sound was prayer flags rustling.

She felt grateful to be alive there above 29,000 feet. Yet the Mount Shasta resident didn't feel like celebrating at the top of the world, even though it was a goal she'd so often dreamed about and trained so hard to attain.

There was a storm brewing below, a storm that could trap her on the summit like some of the 15 climbers who died 10 years ago on Everest. And she was dangerously low on oxygen.

So, trouble trumped all sense of triumph and down the mountain she went.

"I didn't get this jubilation. I was still really scared about getting down," said Bagley, 45, who reached the summit

May 25 and returned to California on June 6.

The summit experience, the numbing exposure and the daunting expanse of the climb are forever etched on Bagley's soul. But imprinted just as deep is the surreal eeriness of Mount Everest, a place of immense power where the fallen bodies of those who did not return are exposed in a high-altitude graveyard.

Some of the corpses were fresh reminders that the mountain does not care. Everest's 2006 spring climbing season claimed 11 lives, nine of them on the North Route that Bagley used.

She had to step over the dead on the trip up in darkness. On her descent to avoid the storm and replenish her oxygen, the daylight revealed even more bodies -- a mix of the recent dead and likely others who had met their alpine demise in years past.

On top of the challenge to reach the summit and return safely, Bagley climbed during a year in which Everest became a mountain of controversy.

Fellow 2006 climbers such as Englishman David Sharp and Australian Lincoln Hall were left to die, although Hall survived. There was very public criticism -- on Web sites and in the media -- of commercial expeditions that allowed inexperienced climbers to climb to Everest's upper reaches.

More than once in Bagley's e-mail dispatches to her California supporters, she made note of tragedies. And she was distressed to hear about Sharp.

"It was heartbreaking to me," she said, adding that she doesn't want to pass judgment on those who might have exercised poor judgment to even attempt the climb. "That's a real personal decision."

Each breath is torture

Bagley left for Nepal on March 29 in preparation for her May summit attempt. She paid \$20,000 to climb with Project Himalaya, a professional guide service and outfitter that provides experienced expedition leaders and Sherpa climbing guides/porters. Climbers can hire outfitters and guides for anywhere from \$6,500 to \$100,000. The standard package is \$15,000 to \$20,000 for a guide-assisted climb with oxygen. The rock-bottom price of \$6,500 is for an outfitter to arrange permits and manage base camp -- but not provide oxygen. Climbers pay another \$3,500 for gear, airfare and other costs.

Bagley spent three weeks trekking in Nepal to get acclimatized. She then flew to Tibet and trekked to the 16,892-foot North Side Base Camp. Adjusting to the increasing altitude was fairly easy until Advanced Base Camp (20,926 feet), where air became thinner and colder, dropping to 20 below zero Fahrenheit. Breathing hurt.

"It's hard to explain how painful it is up there. Everything is uncomfortable and unpleasant and scary. Even in the tent at night, you wake up gasping for air and it feels like someone has their hand over your mouth," she said.

The toughest mental challenge was to accept that or give up, she said. At \$400 a bottle, oxygen was too expensive to use below 25,000 feet. Bagley lost weight and felt exhausted. Everyone got sore throats and hacking coughs that wouldn't go away.

"As you're breaking down up there, there just isn't enough oxygen for your body to go through any kind of a healing process," she said.

Too many are ill-prepared

Bagley's expedition leader, 48-year-old alpinist Scott Woolums of Hood River, Ore., said Bagley was in exceptionally good shape. "She was extremely focused and determined. She was very strong, too," he said.

Project Himalaya oversaw two expeditions. The Everest Peace Project (EPP) set off for the summit first on May 14. Bagley's team members learned how quickly death comes on Everest as they continued acclimatizing and heard communication dispatches about Sharp.

They also heard dispatches about EPP member Selebelo "Sele" Selamolela, who collapsed from an oxygen problem after becoming the second black African to reach Everest's summit.

With the help of Project Himalaya project leader Jamie McGuinness, Selamolela's oxygen mask was fixed and he started down. Two Sherpas met them with more oxygen. Selamolela was barely breathing when he arrived just above High Camp I.

Bagley listened in on communications while they decided whether to organize a rescue or leave him.

"There are choices to be made up there and people are doing the best they can. But you don't want more than one fatality because people are trying to rescue him," she said.

They rallied 10 fresh Sherpas waiting to support the second expedition. In the middle of the night, the Sherpas carried Selamolela down to Advanced Base Camp in a stretcher.

Guides decide which clients to accept. Then guides become responsible for clients' safety, but only "up to a point" because clients "can still do dumb things," said McGuinness.

"Once companies have outlined their safety policies, then it is the buyer's choice of just how much safety they want to pay for," he said. "The real issue is what are the responsibilities of climbers -- independent or big, supported expeditions -- to other climbers in trouble?"

Bagley said too many of the 250 climbers she saw were unprepared. Some attempted to reach the summit despite being ill or clearly inexperienced. For her part, Bagley had been an active adventure racer and climber, with a recent climb to the summit of Mount McKinley (a.k.a. Denali) -- and a record climb, for women, up Mount Shasta.

On top of the world

Good weather arrived May 22. Bagley's group left Advanced Base Camp for High Camp 1 (23,091 feet). The next day, climbing above 23,000 feet left Bagley so weak and slow that she decided to stop if she felt that way the next day. But at High Camp 2 (25,000 feet), the climbers went on oxygen. Breathing and sleeping got easier. The next morning, climbing to High Camp 3 (26,928 feet), she had to adjust to climbing with an oxygen mask, which made seeing difficult.

They were now well into the "death zone," so named because, beginning around 26,000 feet, the body starts shutting down from the lack of oxygen.

At 11:30 p.m., the climbers started their summit push with Woolums, seven Sherpas and five climbing clients. They used fixed lines to climb steep rock, ice, narrow ledges and a narrow trail with a huge dropoff. Bagley was assigned to a Sherpa named Nim Chirri.

"Because it was so dark, I didn't have any perspective at all. It was just one foot in front of the other, focused on the Sherpa in front of me. He was my beacon," she said.

Communication was limited because they wore masks and spoke different languages. Chirri was protective, compassionate and highly experienced technically. Two hours into the push, they came to Sharp's body lying over the 3-foot-wide trail.

"I was too scared to go past that scene. He just took my hand and very slowly and firmly pulled me past all of that," said Bagley, who had to step over Sharp's body.

She almost turned back after her feet tangled in old ropes on a tiny ledge with a long dropoff, just above a 100-foot cliff called the Second Step. She panicked, couldn't breathe, and nearly lost it before someone freed her.

Bagley said they found disabled German climber Thomas Weber crawling at the Third Step, but his guide said he was OK. They soon came to another scary section -- a narrow traverse around the summit pinnacle and vertical climb on exposed, icy slabs up the pinnacle, which is a false summit.

Then they ascended the summit ridge and climbed to the roughly 35-by-35-foot summit plateau, where Chirri clipped Bagley into a fixed rope for safety. Bagley was the first Western summiter from her group.

"I had kind of this sense of awe, like I was in a dream. It was hard to believe I was actually there," Bagley said.

But she couldn't celebrate until she got back down.

"I was tired but not exhausted. I knew I had plenty (of strength) to get down at that point. But the thing is, you never know when you're going to run out," she said. Most climbers spend five minutes on the summit due to depleting oxygen supplies and the danger of being there. Bagley lost track of time and waited 20 to 30 minutes for the rest of the group. Woolums checked her oxygen level and discovered it was too low. So Chirri and Bagley descended quickly under stress to an emergency oxygen supply at the Third Step.

They passed Hall on his way up with two Sherpas. He'd suffered a short fall and was moving slowly.

"I remember saying, 'Are you OK?' His reply was, 'Yeah, I'm just moving slow.' To me, that wasn't a cause for alarm," she said.

Roughly 40 bodies she hadn't seen in the dark now stood out -- at least 11 close to the trail.

They encountered Weber and his guides above the Second Step. Scared, Bagley waited for her group. Weber descended with help but collapsed at the bottom. Woolums and two Sherpas climbed down to assist but sent Bagley and the rest ahead. She was half way down the ladder as Woolums got Weber upright and checked his vitals. He was already dead.

All things are possible

The storm hit with fierce winds and snow just as they made it to High Camp 2. They slept in tents and returned to Advanced Base Camp by noon. From there, they would have only a beautiful trail the rest of the way down. The climb was over. "It was just like a giant weight had lifted off me," Bagley said.

Bagley's glad she climbed Everest. Only six of 13 climbers in her group made the summit, she said.

The mountain, she says, showed her that all things are possible in her life if she sets small goals and takes small steps toward them.

"Anything is possible. For anyone. I'm a perfect example of that given that I'm not a famous mountaineer or anything," she said. "I think I could make it happen. I don't think I felt that way before."

Helping kids climb out of poverty

One of Laurie Bagley's goals in climbing Mount Everest was to raise money for a program called Privilege Sharing. The program provides funds to improve children's lives in some of India's poorest villages.

Bagley has raised \$5,000 for the organization and \$8,000 to offset the overall \$23,000 cost of the climb. She hopes to raise another \$5,000 for Privilege Sharing by giving talks on surviving the death zone.

"People want the vicarious experience of climbing Everest," she said. "After having been there, I can totally appreciate why."

There wasn't much interest in donating to the project founded by Mount Shasta resident Diane Kirwin until the Everest climb was tied to it, Bagley said. People excited about the climb continue to donate to Privilege Sharing, she said.

"I think people need some sort of connection about what they're giving. The connection here was Everest and climbing, and the comparison between the mountain I'm climbing and the mountain those (impoverished) kids are climbing every day," she said.

Speaking fees or donations will go entirely to the organization, she said. For more information, contact Kirwin at 317 Merritt Ave., Mount Shasta, CA 96067 or www.climbforthechildren.com.

About the writer:

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outdoors. Reach her at suzanne_hurt@yahoo.com.



Bagley, wearing the blue hat, takes a break at the summit of Mount Everest. As of the 2004 climbing season, 2,249 climbers had made it to the top. Only 101 of them were women. Statistics for the 2005 and 2006 season have not been added to the everesthistory.com list yet, but Bagley will be among them. Scott Woolums



Above, tents are pitched at High Camp 3 at 27,200 feet, the last part of the climb up Mount Everest. Scott Woolums



At left, Laurie Bagley talks on the radio to a fellow climber in a nearby tent while in High Camp 1 at about 23,000 feet. It's really cold - about 15 to 20 degrees below zero. Scott Woolums

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