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### Sports

# HIGH HOPES: Blind climber is prepared to scale Mt. Kilimanjaro

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By Gregg T. Carbone  
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When Edwin Montanez moved from Puerto Rico to Weehawken 28 years ago, he came with his bags packed and his hopes high.

Montanez was 11-years-old and he was going blind. He was born with a retina detachment and began having problems with his eyes from the age of five. After operations on his damaged eyes in his native land, Montanez came to America with hope of salvaging what was left of his fading vision.

"We came to find out if doctors could save the little eyesight that I had left," said Montanez, who is now 40 and living in Hoboken. "When we got here I enrolled in public school and got an operation on my eyes."

The operation failed, however, and Montanez slowly walked into a world of darkness.

"When the doctor told me that they could not do any more for me I was very disappointed," said Montanez. "But thanks to the support system that I had, and still have, around me with my family, I was able to move forward instead of wondering what was going to happen to me."

Montanez moved forward expeditiously.

Almost immediately following the failed surgery, he enrolled in the Perkins School for the blind in Massachusetts where he graduated with a high school diploma. He then attended Baruch College in New York City where he earned a degree in business administration.

But Montanez wasn't all business. He was always very active and, after finding a job in the computer programming field, Montanez got more

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involved with athletics.

In 1985, he joined The Achilles Track Club, an international non-profit organization that encourages people with various disabilities to exercise with the general public. Achilles volunteers help disabled people participate in activities they normally might not try.

"Achilles is a great organization," said Montanez. "I always liked to run. For me, being totally blind, they provide a volunteer so that I can run."

Because of Achilles, Montanez fulfilled a lifelong dream of running in the New York City Marathon in 1992. He finished with the help of two Achilles volunteers in a little over seven hours.

As time went on, Montanez continued to do more, both with Achilles and on his own. He ran competitively, took ballroom dancing classes, went scuba diving and tried skiing, hiking and rock climbing, always looking for something new to experience.

"Anything that I find interesting I like to try," said Montanez. "If I read about or if I hear about it then I want to try it."

Now, Montanez wants to try mountain climbing. And not just any mountain, he wants to climb to the top of Mount Kilimanjaro - the 19,344-foot mountain located in Tanzania, Africa.

"About two years ago I heard about some (South African chapter Achilles) members climbing Mount Kilimanjaro," Montanez said. "When I saw them again and they told me about the climb I wanted to try it."

Several other New York chapter Achilles members were intrigued at the prospect of climbing the highest mountain in Africa, the tallest freestanding mountain in the world. With the help of several corporate sponsors Achilles is organizing an expedition to Africa.

"We did a lot of fundraising and got a lot of corporate support," said Achilles Project Development Director Adrienne Cooney. "You know we couldn't do this without British Airways providing the airfare or Park East Tours providing equipment and clothing."

"It's really been a group effort. Everyone is very excited."

Montanez along with six other disabled athletes and 20 Achilles Track Club volunteers will set out on their journey Monday. After a stopover in London, they'll land in Nairobi, Africa Tuesday and will begin the eight-day climb (six days up and two days down) August 27 after a five-day acclimatization period in Tanzania.

Three other members of The Kilimanjaro Expedition are blind. However, there are also two amputee/cancer survivors and a deaf/asthmatic. They range in age from 24-57 and have been Achilles members for a long time.

Montanez and his fellow climbers have trained three days a week for the past four months to prepare for the arduous climb, doing everything from weight training to calisthenics to hiking and running.

"We started training in April," said Montanez. "But to be honest, it seems a lot longer."

"I've never seen them in such great shape," added Cooney, who trains with the group once a week and also will climb Kilimanjaro. "They have really worked hard."

Needless to say, Montanez is excited. His only other real mountain climbing experience came in preparation for The Kilimanjaro Expedition when he climbed a mountain in Colorado (11,200 feet high) about a month ago. But that was nothing compared to Kilimanjaro and Montanez knows it.

"I've never climbed a mountain that high," said Montanez. "I've never been past 12,000 feet. I don't know what to expect."

One thing that Montanez does expect, however, is to enjoy another unique experience.

"I think I'm ready; I'm pretty confident," added Montanez. "I have done everything and more to prepare for this."

"When I get back I'm going to need to take a couple of weeks and just relax."

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