

Welcome, Nancy Mendez-Booth

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> [National News](#) > [Deloitte Life Online](#) > [Fall 2009](#) > Deloitte Life - Mountain climbing

Peak performers

A few Deloitte adventurers share their mountain climbing experiences.

It's small wonder that the word mountain is often used metaphorically in connection with something that represents a great amount of work – a challenging project, say, or coming to grips with a piece of complicated tax code. Trying to reach the top of a real mountain also takes a lot of work, as many people have discovered – including quite a number of Deloitte professionals. Here are the stories of the climbing experiences of two of them.

Family summitry

Vacation photos can often tell a lot more than just where you got your tan or that goofy T-shirt. They sometimes are able to provide a glimpse into your life story – your interests, memorable locations and the people with whom you share your experiences. Consultant Paul El-Meouchy has holiday snapshots that tell just such a story: two smiling, exhilarated-looking people who are "on top of the world," thousands of feet above sea level.

Since 2007, El-Meouchy, who joined Consulting as an analyst in 2004, and his mother, Lina Sarraf, have been pursuing their goal of climbing to the top of the highest mountain on each continent – the so-called Seven Summits.

The spark for such a project had been struck much earlier in his life, says El-Meouchy, who works in Consulting's Human Capital Total Rewards group. "My mom is an amazing person. For a woman in her early fifties, she's unusually active," El-Meouchy says. "She is trying to get into a club made up of people who have climbed the 115 highest peaks [those above 4,000 feet] in the northeastern United States. She has hiked Mount Washington [6,288 feet, in New Hampshire] and Mount Marcy [5,344 feet, in New York] several times. And for the past five years, she has walked to and from work in Montreal – about 11 miles total – every day regardless of the weather. Her personality gave me a great appreciation for the outdoors as I was growing up."

It was this appreciation that compelled El-Meouchy to leave his native Montreal and attend United World College (UWC) in Montezuma, NM. UWC is part of an international group of two-year, pre-university residential schools dedicated to increasing international, intercultural understanding and peace through academics, community service and outdoor activities. After graduating with a concentration in wilderness activities and expeditions, El-Meouchy got a job as an instructor in the outdoor education department at Cornell University, where he was also a student.

El-Meouchy and his mother stayed in touch. He told her about taking a two-week alpine mountaineering course, where he learned how to walk on glaciers and use ice axes, and his experience on a 14-day GR20 trek – a trail of more than 110 miles across the island of Corsica that is rated as one of the most difficult hikes in Europe. And he described his attempt in 2006 to reach the summit of Mont Blanc (the highest mountain in the Alps and in Western Europe) with a friend from college. (After trying to wait out a storm for three days in a tent about 4,500 feet below the top, El-Meouchy and his friend decided to head back down. "We were camped at 11,000 feet when the storm came in," El-Meouchy says. "The visibility was only a few feet.")

All this talk about mountain climbing led to an idea. "My mom had always wanted to climb Mont Blanc," recalls El-Meouchy. "Because of my previous experience with that mountain, I thought I could help her achieve her dream."

So early in 2007, Sarraf took a mountaineering course. She had climbed much smaller peaks than Mont Blanc in the past, but this was going to be her biggest challenge. That summer, El-Meouchy and Sarraf made their first ascent as a mother-and-son team, trekking 15,781 feet and reaching the summit of the famous mountain. Since that successful hike, El-Meouchy and Sarraf have traveled together to Tanzania, where they reached the top of Mount Kilimanjaro (19,340 feet), and to Argentina, where threatening weather halted their attempt to conquer mighty Cerro Aconcagua (22,834 feet) about 800 feet from the top. "We were disappointed," says El-Meouchy, "but at least we reached the 22,000-foot level, which was quite an accomplishment. We plan to try Aconcagua again this coming winter."

On their first Aconcagua attempt, El-Meouchy and his mother learned what many climbers have concluded – it's the mountain that decides who reaches the summit. They also learned that just because the goal isn't reached doesn't mean there are not other rewards, such as being surrounded by nature, meeting a challenge and spending time together. El-Meouchy says he approaches every climb with respect and acknowledgment of the things that cannot be controlled, such as individual reactions to altitude sickness and weather. El-Meouchy says that the Aconcagua experience served as an inspiration, not a deterrence, thus ensuring more photos and a lot more "tall tales" in the future.

The seven highest

Here are the tallest mountains on each of the seven continents. El-Meouchy and his mother have so far attempted two of them: Kilimanjaro and Aconcagua.

| Mountain | Continent | Feet |
|---------------|------------|--------|
| Everest | Asia | 29,035 |
| Aconcagua | S. America | 22,834 |
| Denali | N. America | 20,320 |
| Kilimanjaro | Africa | 19,340 |
| Elbrus | Europe | 18,510 |
| Vinson Massif | Antarctica | 16,066 |
| Kosciuszko | Australia | 7,310 |