

# *The* TOP *of the* WORLD

by Eric Apalategui



Life after college has brought plenty of University of Alabama graduates to dizzying heights—literally, in the case of the following alumni, who separately found their ways into the thin air on top of Mount Kilimanjaro.

For some, climbing Africa's tallest mountain was an inspirational stop along life's journey. For others, reaching the summit was transformational. All have had professional careers but, for the moment at least, traded their climate-controlled offices for the uncontrollable wonders of nature at high altitudes. Two plan to go on until they climb the highest mountain on every continent, what veteran climbers revere as the Seven Summits. Two others don't aspire to reach the top of the world again, but have mapped out lives filled with adventure.

### THE ACCIDENTAL CLIMBER

Kent Stewart had never been much of an outdoorsman. He remembers being completely ill-prepared when he and wife Julie reached the 19,340-foot Kilimanjaro summit as part of an African vacation in 2006.

"I was hurting. I was hallucinating. I was just not in very good shape. It really caught up with me on summit day," said Stewart, who earned his bachelor's degree in business in 1978 and his law degree in 1981, both at UA, and later founded Reli Title in Birmingham, Ala., where he is CEO. Julie attended UA as well, but finished the final credits to earn her English degree at The University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"We got to the bottom two or three days later, and I said I would never, ever climb another mountain," Stewart said. "Then, it's really weird, but every day that goes by after you get home, you remember more and more about the



*(Facing page) Kent and Julie Stewart press toward the top of Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina, and (above on left) summit Mt. Elbrus with two Russian guides.*

good part and less and less about the bad part."

So he and Julie next climbed Russia's Mount Elbrus in the summer of 2007, and the idea of climbing the world's Seven Summits seemed within reach. "Once you've done two, then it really starts to become an obsession," he said. "I think about the next mountain every day."

In the past few years, they conquered the high points in Australia, Antarctica and South America.

Mount Kosciuszko in Australia's Snowy Mountains is a modest climb, nontechnical like Kilimanjaro but at much lower altitudes. Vinson Massif in Antarctica is so inhospitable and remote that if something bad happens, "you might as well be on the moon," Stewart said. Temperatures there dipped to minus 41 degrees. And Argentina's Aconcagua, like Elbrus, routinely claims the lives of climbers, without much publicity.

In fact, on their climb to the summit of Aconcagua in early 2009, the Stewarts and their guide passed one corpse and thought they spotted another near the top—until it moved. They ended up saving the Romanian climber, who was dehydrated, disoriented and had given up hope. "We were the only people who summited that day so if we hadn't, no one would have found him."





The rescue ended up an emotional high point of their accidental climbing career, but they still have two more literal high points to reach before joining the exclusive club of climbers who have been to the top of every continent. So far, Stewart said, they have been lucky to reach every peak on their first try. "So much of it is out of your control."

This June, they will go to Alaska to attempt Mount McKinley (Denali). After that, they will set their sights on Mount Everest, the 29,029-foot king of the world's mountains. "Part of me wishes we had failed on one so I could quit," Stewart said. "If some how, some way, we can get to the top of these two, my life as a risk-taker would be over."

## SHEER DETERMINATION

Anna Curry was born with a severe form of osteogenesis imperfecta (OI), a genetic disorder that made her bones so brittle some broke in the womb even before delivery. As a child, she could fracture a bone while bending to pick up a coloring book. She stopped counting the breaks, but figures she's had 150 to 200.

"It's sort of all I've ever known," said Curry, whose parents encouraged her to live life fully despite the injuries. "It comes naturally for me to break bones."

Still, forgive some people if they quietly thought she was a little crazy for attempting to climb Mount Kilimanjaro last fall.

The idea first came up in conversation while she was a student in the

UA School of Law. At that time, finishing her law degree in 2005 and beginning her career as an employment law attorney in Atlanta got in the way.

In early 2007, after surgery to both legs, Curry was confined to a wheelchair. She needed a goal to push herself through a long recovery and found it in the far-off Kilimanjaro. Her father, Ashley Curry, a former FBI agent who earned his degree in industrial management at UA in 1971, wanted to come along.

Anna Curry worked her way from physical therapy to low-impact exercise to the Stairmaster. In 2008, she joined



*The Stewarts pause at base camp before climbing Antarctica's Mt. Vinson.*

Little Mendelson law firm in Birmingham, Ala., and started doing training hikes around Oak Mountain State Park. That August, she and her father climbed 14,036-foot Mount Sherman



*Anna Curry, with father Ashley, conquered Colorado's Mt. Sherman.*



in Colorado. “I found it really difficult,” she said. “I was also kind of invigorated after summiting. I figured if I could do that, I could climb Kilimanjaro.”

Thirteen months later, the Currys and their guides were picking their way up the African mountain. “You’re dealing with crazy-high altitudes and difficult terrain all over the place,” she said of their week-long ascent. “We moved much more slowly—sort of whatever pace I could do that day.”

After years of recovery and preparation, on the day they reached Kilimanjaro’s summit, “All I could think about was the hamburger and the shower I was going to have when we got back to the hotel,” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t have much time for personal reflection.”

Curry had joined the OI Foundation’s board in 2007, and turned her climb into a fundraiser for the organization. She set up a Web site, [www.climb-kilimanjaro-for-oif.com](http://www.climb-kilimanjaro-for-oif.com), with a goal of raising \$19,400, an amount to match one estimate of Kilimanjaro’s height in feet. To date, she has raised more than \$29,000—a Mount Everest sum for OI

research and education.

Although Curry’s bones aren’t as brittle in adulthood, she still sounds amazed she reached the summit, and without a single break. “Typically, people with severe OI are wheelchair users or walk with some sort of assistive device. To set a goal of a mountain climb is pretty unheard of, quite frankly,” said Curry, who hopes her conquest will inspire others. “Whatever the mountain, it can be tackled.”

## BEYOND THE CORPORATE LADDER

Kimberly Till likes to move *fast*, whether reshaping another corporation or moving across the Gobi Desert.

After earning her bachelor’s degree in history at UA in 1977, Till collected an MBA at Harvard and a law degree at Duke. Early in her career, she spun

together two prestigious fellowships and worked as a corporate attorney and business consultant before helping revamp Disney’s European operations.

In the business magazines, you can read about Till’s journey through high-level management jobs with Sony, AOL and Microsoft before becoming the chief executive officer who turned around Taylor Nelson Sofres North America, a division of one of the world’s largest market research companies. Today she is doing much the same as president and CEO of another leading market research firm, Harris Interactive.

What isn’t in her corporate bio, and

*(Above) The Currys reached the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro.*

*(Below) Kimberly Till, center, with friends Paul Hartsock, right, and Lorne Adrain, left, also reached Africa’s highest point.*







perhaps what her board of directors would rather not contemplate, is that Till spends time off in some of the most exotic—and sometimes dangerous—corners on Earth.

While traveling on business, Till has seen many of the highest-profile destinations. So rather than touring art galleries in Paris or sampling sushi in Tokyo, “For my holidays, I’ve picked the really obscure places,” she said. On one trip, she set into the wilds of Patagonia near the tip of South America, on another across the sands of the Sahara outside Timbuktu in northern Africa. She’s chartered a plane up the Skeleton Coast of Namibia, and hired a driver in Ulan Bator for her 2008 trip across Mongolia’s desolate Gobi Desert.

“I rarely do organized tours,” Till said. She prefers to hire a knowledgeable guide, spend time with local people and make up her agenda as she goes.



*Till hitches a ride on a camel while traveling in Mongolia.*

“There are no rules. There is no playbook. I like everything to move fast.”

Till, now based in New York City, often applies that style in the corporate world. “You’re re-creating a company in the same way as hitting the ground in one of these exotic locations.”

At times, with travel at least, this approach can lead to extra excitement, as when thieves stole from her on the Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan, well before the current war. Tribal leaders returned her property. “You end up in some interesting situa-

tions when it’s not organized,” Till said.

Close calls haven’t dissuaded her from looking to the next adventure. “You always have three or four places you want to go next,” she said. She hopes to track gorillas in Uganda and Rwanda, trek into Antarctica and be one of the first Americans back into North Korea, if allowed—much as she arrived in Vietnam soon after travel restrictions were lifted there.

Till isn’t focused on mountain climbing itself, but sometimes finds her adventurous spirit takes her there. She went to the top of Kilimanjaro in 2004 and may one day make it to base camp at Mount Everest. She has no driving need to climb that summit, but would enjoy the atmosphere around the world’s tallest peak. “It’s the holy grail,” she said, “kind of like being a CEO is the big pinnacle.”

## SEEKING HIGHER GROUND

For years, while writing budgets at the U.S. Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., Chris Paslawski could only dream of mountains that had beckoned him from the pages of books and distant horizons since childhood. But Paslawski, a 1994 UA graduate in history, had bought the notion that his life’s work was a 9-to-5 affair, filled with meetings and deadlines and a modest annual vacation until he retired.

He started rethinking his priorities following a divorce and his mother’s death. “It’s really made me realize how short life is,” he said. “I might not have



*Chris Paslawski took time away from climbing to get acquainted with the locals in Nepal.*





*Paslawski, left, and a fellow climber were turned back just shy of Aconcagua's summit due to weather conditions. He plans to try again.*

a retirement. You never know."

Then, on a vacation he climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, where he could see to the edge of the Earth. Things suddenly became clearer. "I thought that I was on top of the world. I knew I was on top of Africa there, but I just felt like I was in heaven. It seems like I was seeing into eternity. It was one of the happiest moments in my life," Paslawski said. "At that point I knew I was doing something I was meant to do, and it wasn't the budget work."

Paslawski saved up a little more money and quit the labor department last August. By September, he was in Nepal, volunteering time with orphans and teaching English to Buddhist monks. A few months later, he was on the flank of Argentina's Mount Aconcagua, spending his 44th birthday trying to scale the tallest peak in South America.

A storm forced his climbing party off Aconcagua a couple hundred feet shy of its summit, after another climber perished on the climb just days before. "Whereas Kilimanjaro is like this warm mother embracing you, Aconcagua's like this fiery Argentinean woman. She's very temperamental," said Paslawski, who still lives in Bethesda, Md. "I need to go back. That's okay."

He plans to meet up with her again on his way to scaling the highest points on all seven continents, but first up in late March he is returning to Nepal, where he will attend glacier-climbing school and resume his volunteer work. His next summit attempt might be this September on Elbrus, the highest point in Europe. Everest could come as early as 2011.

Paslawski acknowledges that he might run out of money before he runs out of summits, but he figures his volunteer work or his climbing experience will open a new door.

"Sitting in my office back there, it seemed like I was in a cell. A very nice cell . . . but it didn't feel like I was fulfill-

## THE SEVEN SUMMITS

### **Africa (Tanzania)—**

Mount Kilimanjaro, 19,340 feet

### **Antarctica—**

Vinson Massif, 16,067 feet

### **Asia (Nepal/Tibet)—**

Mount Everest, 29,029 feet

### **Australia (mainland)—**

Mount Kosciuszko, 7,310 feet\*

### **Australian continent**

(Indonesia)—Carstensz Pyramid (or Puncak Jaya), 16,023 feet\*

### **Europe (western Russia)—**

Mount Elbrus, 18,510 feet

### **North America (Alaska)—**

Mount McKinley (or Denali), 20,320 feet

### **South America (Argentina)—**

Mount Aconcagua, 22,841 feet

\*Climber Dick Bass, who popularized the challenge of climbing each continent's tallest peak, considered Kosciuszko to be Australia's high point, but other climbers support the taller and more complicated Carstensz, which sits on the continental shelf on the island of New Guinea, in Indonesia.

ing my potential as a human being," he said by telephone from the Dominican Republic in early January. "I'm figuring it all out. I have a feeling I'm on the right path."

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