

ONE CHARTERHOLDER'S QUEST TOOK HIM TO THE TOP OF MT. KILIMANJARO

BY JONATHAN BARNES

Cern Basher, CFA, was one day from the peak of Mt. Kilimanjaro when he experienced a moment of insight.

Basher's son, Dane, was born with 22q13 deletion syndrome, a rare genetic condition caused by an absence of genes in the 22nd chromosome. The Kilimanjaro climbers—Basher, his 70-year-old father, and two friends—were climbing in honor of Dane. They had organized the climb as a fund-raiser for the 22q13 Deletion Foundation.

The syndrome was identified only 15 years ago. Children born with the condition are affected in different ways, but most experience significant delays in speech and motor skills and share certain autistic-like symptoms.

For Dane Basher, the days are full of challenges. This summer, after five years of aquatic therapy, he took his first independent steps in the water.

On Kilimanjaro, Basher recalls, "We were at the edge of an enormous crater—probably a mile across—that forms the edge of the summit ridge, and I just started thinking about Dane and the challenges that he goes through and will be going through for the rest of his life. He's eight years old, and he's already gone through a brain surgery and had a number of other medical issues. He spends a good deal of his day learning to walk.

"He spends an incredible amount of time and energy learning to do things that for you and me come very naturally," Basher continues. "Every single day, there's something that's a struggle, that's not comfortable. For you and me, we can challenge ourselves, we can climb a mountain, but then we can stop, we can go back to our lives again. For him, he's constantly climbing a mountain like that. That's the kind of realization that I came to."

The incredible part, says Basher, is that in spite of his hardships, Dane is an amazingly happy kid. "He's always laughing," Basher says. "He absolutely loves watching sports on television. We were watching golf, and whenever Tiger Woods and the other golfers were in their backswing, he'd start laughing. In some ways, that has made things very easy for us: Our house is always full of laughter; it's always a pleasant place to be. There was actually one time when Dane went away to camp for a week, and it was odd because our house was very quiet. Dane wasn't laughing."

Basher and his wife became involved with the 22q13 Deletion Foundation when Dane was nearly five, after a genetic test discovered the missing gene sequence. Prior to that, the diagnosis of doctors had been cerebral palsy. Only about 300 children worldwide have been identified as having 22q13 deletion, but the foundation has succeeded in providing support and information for them and their families. The foundation holds a biennial meeting and has an e-mail discussion list, through which Basher receives 5–15 e-mails daily from other families sharing solutions and advice.

The idea of climbing Kilimanjaro began initially as a joint trip for Cern Basher and his father, both enthusiastic and long-time climbers. (Cern grew up in Calgary, Canada, on the edge of the Canadian Rockies.) Eventually, the trip evolved into a climb for Dane and the 22q13 Deletion Foundation.

Fund-raising efforts were focused on family and friends. Although the investment company that Basher co-founded in 2000, Madison Wealth Management, sent information about the climb to clients, the firm did not ask clients contribute. Nevertheless, a number of them volunteered donations. In total, the Kilimanjaro climb raised more than US\$37,000.





Using the guide services of Tusker Trail and a team of 22 porters, the Basher group began their climb in May 2007. At 19,340 feet, Kilimanjaro is the highest point in Africa and the tallest free-standing mountain rise in the world—15,000 feet from its base. The climb route would begin in Kilimanjaro National Park, a lush rain forest inhabited by Cape buffalo, elephants, monkeys, and leopards, then ascend through grasslands and heather and over rock to the magnificent glaciers of Kilimanjaro's peak.

"I'd been dreaming about that moment for a long time," says Basher. "To see these glaciers that are up there and are quickly disappearing—to see that in my lifetime before they're gone was very special for me."

Basher had made laminated photos of Dane for the trip. He remembers the tangible feeling that Dane was part of the team. "Every day, we made recordings of our thoughts," he says. "Dane's name came up in conversation most of the time. We'd take his pictures out every morning before we left and look at them and show Dane where we were going up the mountain. He was in my thoughts constantly. As a father, there's a part of me that's always dreamed that I would be able to do this with Dane—certainly when he was first born and we weren't aware of the situation. You might imagine some of things you'd want to do with your kid. For me to be able to take him up the mountain and to treat him like he was there, was very special."

"We feel tremendously fortunate that Dane is in our lives," says Basher. "We're involved in things we probably would never be involved in. In some ways, it's forced us to slow down and care about other things in our lives besides our profession. Both my wife and I were very career driven, and having Dane in our lives forced us to change. It forced us to find a way to make our careers work but, at the same time, focus on our family."

In addition, Basher believes that Dane's presence in the Cincinnati school he attends has a healthy effect on the other kids in the class. "He's in a typical classroom," says Basher, "and if anything, it's probably more of an experience for the other kids than for Dane. I'm constantly amazed at how wonderful the other children are with him. When I went to school, some children made fun of kids who were different. In today's world, that has completely changed. It is unbelievable." ▀

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