

## A PEAK EXPERIENCE

Kathi Vieser Bianco\*  
(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2009)

At an age when many people have difficulty climbing the stairs, Dr. William Bonnice climbed Mount Kilimanjaro.



**H**ow do you plan to celebrate your 80th birthday, should you be so blessed as to reach it? Will you gather your family for a nice dinner? Perhaps play shuffleboard on a Caribbean cruise? Dr. William “bil” Bonnice, adjunct professor in the Department of Mathematics & Computer Science, wanted to mark the occasion with something a little more special, so he decided to climb a mountain. But not just a local peak—he decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest point on the African continent at more than 19,000 feet above sea level. While logistics and physical training added another year to the plans, Bonnice was determined to make the climb—and to bring along his extended family for company.

Bonnice and his partner, Carol Farmer, have made a practice of organizing and taking vacations with as many as 37 family members at a time. During one of these trips, Bonnice proposed the group climb as part of an African safari. “I particularly thought that this would be a life-changing educational and maturing experience for the grandchildren,” he says. “I was heartened that eight grandchildren came. Now that the trip is over, I am more certain that I was right.”

The physical preparation for the trip involved a regimen that included cross-country skiing, hiking and deep-breathing exercises. Bonnice was already in excellent physical condition for a man his age, often

walking the 1.1 miles to Rivier with a backpack full of books. But he has an irregular heartbeat, as well as intense knee pain that proved challenging during the climb.

An additional concern was the effect of the high altitude. About eight months before the trip, Bonnice read about a study on high altitude climbers in *Appalachian Club Magazine*. The study examined 55 climbers, 10 of whom climbed Kilimanjaro. MRIs of the climbers before and after their climbs showed that the majority of them suffered from permanent brain lesions as a result. “When I read that, I immediately decided I would not go to the top,” Bonnice says. He instead planned to go part of the way and wait for the rest of his party to reach the top and come back.



The climb began on July 19, 2008 with 20 members of the Bonnice–Farmer families, several guides and 68 porters to carry equipment and supplies to camp on the mountain. Bonnice realized on the second day that he couldn’t keep up with the pace that was being set and slowed down, along with several others. Fatigue proved to be a daunting obstacle.

Bonnice says the first few days of climbing left him so exhausted he decided he couldn’t continue. “My guide, Raymond, encouraged me to see how I would feel the next morning. And he was right.” It went that way for the rest of the climb: “Usually through the morning, I would feel full of energy, but after lunch I would feel run down and by the time we got to camp, I would again say, ‘That was my last day.’ But in the morning I would feel better and decide to try to go one more day.”

By the time the group reached a point 300 feet below the summit, Bonnice realized that he had not felt any headaches or other symptoms of altitude sickness. “I reasoned to myself that if I wasn’t having any serious headaches, I certainly would not be getting any brain lesions,” he says. “I also realized that if I could make it just one more day...I certainly could get up the next morning and climb the remaining 300 feet or so.” And so he began his ascent to the top. “I would step about six inches, take at least two breaths, step another six inches, take two more breaths, step another six inches, etc.,” he says. “To put this into perspective, imagine taking two hours to walk, zigzagging, from one end of a football field to the other.”

But as they neared the top, the group stopped and insisted that Bonnice be the first to get there. “The porters began to chant, ‘Babu, Babu. Babu, Babu’—Swahili for ‘respected grandfather,’” he says. As he reached the peak, he says, “I just raised both arms to the sky with my hiking poles in my hands, overwhelmed with elation, realizing that I had done it, that which at the start I had no intention of doing. This ‘peak’ experience made all the expense and two years of intensive planning and coordination worthwhile for me.”

Eighteen of the 20 family members who started for the top along with Bonnice joined him there (a sick child and his mother stayed behind). They ranged in age from 66 to 13. “At the top, well above the clouds far below, it was beautiful and sunny and not at all bitter cold, as it might well have been,” he says. “It was beautiful, magnificent, awe inspiring.”

It was July 29, 10 days after they had started, and within hours it was time to head back down again. Bonnice’s knee pain and a slow pace that left him and part of his group in pitch darkness made the descent a treacherous adventure. But eventually they reached the bottom again and spent two days on safari at the Ngorongoro Crater, where they rode in open-air SUVs looking at the animals.



Back home, Bonnie spent a bit of time recovering, but eventually felt like himself again. “It’s as if my body has recovered from the climb and built itself up past where I was when we started all this,” he says. All told, the trip cost Bonnie well over \$140,000, funds he cashed out of a retirement account built up during 35 years of teaching at the University of New Hampshire before coming to Rivier in 1996. But he is already planning the next family vacation, a decidedly more sedate gathering on Prince Edward Island.

How will he celebrate his 82nd birthday? “I have no plans at present for any future birthdays, nor for meeting any new challenges,” he says. “However, I am open to possibilities if something comes up that appeals to me.” ■

*‘Babu, Babu. Babu, Babu’*

*—Swahili for “respected grandfather”*

---

\* **KATHI VIESER BIANCO** is a freelance writer from Long Island, New York, specializing in higher education and consumer marketing. The winner of multiple awards for both nonfiction and fiction writing, she holds a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and master's degrees from New York Institute of Technology and the City University of New York-Queens College.