

Mountain climbing & breast cancer

Mountain climbing is a lot like dealing with breast cancer, says Rene'e.

Say you are going through an eight-cycle chemotherapy, if you think about what's going to happen in cycle six, you will not even get through cycle one.

"It's the same in climbing. Let's just get to base camp then worry about the next camp. Don't give up easily.

"Perseverance is the key. Take one step at a time. You must remember the goal. But hey, if you don't get there, it's still OK — you have done what you can. At least you're not going down without a fight."

Then and now

In the five years since she was diagnosed, Rene'e life has changed. Now she makes it a point to live a more fulfilling life.

"I used to be a perfectionist and expected a lot out of others. I was a workaholic," confesses Rene'e.

"Now I tell myself I can still get the job done even if it's 95% perfect. I've learned to let go and not worry about small things.

"One of my girlfriends says I'm a much nicer person now," smiles Rene'e.

For now, her main focus is to ensure the expedition meets its objective.

"Will people say this expedition is a failure because the cancer survivor didn't get to the top? It's NOT about any one of us reaching the top. The message we're trying to get across is just as valid," says Rene'e.

"It's also about support, and the team members are there to carry on for me if I don't make it. They are like the family and friends who will be there for the cancer patient as she goes through her ordeal.

"If this is the last thing that I do, I want it to be meaningful because I can make that difference," she says.

led by Rene'e Aziz Ahmad, the Climb with Pride-Aconcagua expedition team comprises four other climbers of varied backgrounds, who share similar objectives in promoting breast cancer awareness.

Avid mountain climber Khairul Ariffin Ibrahim, 32, is doing this expedition because of his love for mountaineering and dream to climb big alpine mountains like Aconcagua.

"It's an important milestone as far as my climbing goal is concerned. I want to stand on the summit of Mt Everest before I die," says the IT engineer and a father of three.

"I also want to do the best I can to support Rene'e. She is an inspiration to cancer patients and survivors to live life to the fullest."

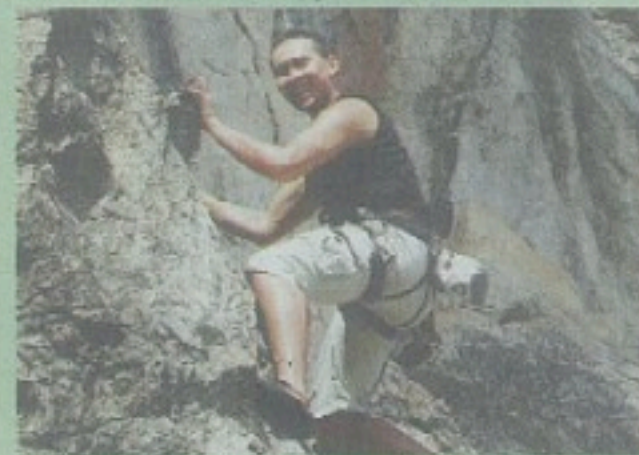
The two have been friends for about six years. Khairul and Rene'e both made it to the peak of Kilimanjaro during their 2005 expedition.

One of the three ladies in the team, petite Shereen Effendy Lee is a bundle of energy and literally sprints up mountains. An outdoor enthusiast, Shereen has also lost two family members to cancer.

Her mother was diagnosed with colon cancer when Shereen was just 16. She saw her mum go through the effects of chemotherapy. From being friendly and outgoing, her mum became withdrawn and anti-social.

"But after the treatment, my

The support team



Climbers: (Clockwise from top left) Khairul, Shereen, Zabil and Stephanie

mum led a very healthy life and even went for her pilgrimage," recalls Shereen, 34, who is an only child.

Four years after her treatment, Shereen's mother suffered a relapse. And this time, she didn't make it.

"I took care of her till the end, bathed and fed her and prayed to God to let her go if it was her time, instead of letting her suf-

fer," says Shereen, a part-time lecturer.

"My mum was always supportive of my love for the outdoors even though deep down, she wished for a more ladylike daughter," smiles Shereen.

"Her fighting spirit lives on in me. I hope that by sharing my experience with others, I can help improve awareness in the disease."

Undoubtedly the fittest team member, Zabil Ihram Zainol, has been learning a lot about breast cancer since he was roped into the expedition.

An outdoor buff and competitive triathlete, the commercial airline pilot is an advocate of healthy living.

"If I can contribute towards the cause by being part of the expedition and doing what I enjoy, why not?" says Zabil, 33, a father of two.

"My main goal is to see Rene'e reach the top and see her succeed," adds Zabil, who trains six days a week. He runs a total of 50km, swims 5km and cycles 200km a week.

"It doesn't matter whether I make it or not."

The youngest team member, Stephanie Chok, 25, is also a competitive adventure racer and triathlete.

"A few of my family members (grandmother, grandfather and aunties) have either survived or died from cancer. I've seen the pain they endured," says Chok, a Universiti Malaya Sports Centre research assistant.

"I think the expedition will help show that Malaysians do care about cancer patients and their struggles. And that there is support out there, financially and spiritually from organisations like Pride." — **By LEONG SIOK HUI**

□ Award-winning documentary filmmaker, Harun Rahman of Novista Sdn Bhd, will tag along to document the team's climb.