

TEAM EVEREST NEPAL

By Russ Willcutt



A group of adventurers with various disabilities set out to reach the Everest Base Camp in 2003. The vast majority of them made it... here's their story.

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Gary Guller stands surrounded by the team of disabled travelers—five of whom are in wheelchairs—that he is responsible for leading safely to Base Camp at the foot of Mount Everest, the world’s tallest peak at 29,000 feet above sea level. He takes a deep breath, saying “goodness in,” and then “badness out” as he releases it. Everyone follows suit, and so the journey begins.

This is just one of many striking scenes found in the documentary “Team Everest: A Himalayan Journey,” which tells the story of a team of adventurers with a variety of disabilities—paraplegics, quadriplegics, amputees, and one member who is deaf, among other conditions such as hip dysplasia, fibromyalgia, and bipolar disorder—who seize the opportunity to become the first group of its type and size to reach Everest Base Camp, which is at an elevation of 17,500 feet. The project was tortuous in nearly every way, presenting the trekkers with some of the most challenging terrain on the planet to cross, the production crew with hard filming on steep, twisted trails, and the support team of Sherpa guides and porters with the harsh physical labor of helping grown men in wheelchairs wrestle their way to the base of the highest mountain on earth.

“We were filming for 21 days, and I lost about 30 pounds during that time,” according to Andy Cockrum, the film’s producer, director, cameraman, and editor. “This was a mental, physical, and technical challenge for everyone involved, but it stands as proof that you can do nearly anything if you put everything you’ve got into it. And that’s definitely what these people did.”

Advent of an Adventure

A film and television industry veteran—he has worked with director Robert Rodriguez on movies such as “Sin City” and two of the Spy Kids projects—Cockrum became involved in the Everest documentary in a fairly circuitous manner. “I had an idea for a TV travel show some years ago profiling interesting people who go interesting places, and that’s how I met Gary,” he recalls, speaking of the film’s co-producer and creator, as well as a logistics coordinator. “He is an experienced mountaineer and motivational speaker who lost his arm in a climbing accident, and even though the show never took off we were able to use the footage we shot of him to help promote the trips he leads into Nepal.”

The two became close friends, and one day they were taking a walk when Guller said ““Hey Andy, I’m taking a team of disabled people to Everest Base Camp, want to come along and film it?” I was skeptical at first,” Cockrum says, “both for the obvious reasons as well as the fact that it was going to cost a crazy amount of money, which he hadn’t managed to raise yet, so I said I was interested but figured we’d see how things progressed.”

And progress they did. Even though major financing for the project proved harder to raise than he’d expected, Guller moved forward with his plans, reaching out

to friends he thought would be excited by the chance to take part in the adventure. “The people who wanted to join the trekking team had to raise something like \$6,000 each on their own,” Cockrum explains, “and some of them even had bake sales and things like that. One guy financed the trip on his credit card.”

Which is exactly what Cockrum did when Guller finally called in the spring of 2003 to say the expedition was a go—he charged the two cameras he and fellow photographer Reid Nixon would need, basically gambling on the chances of funding coming through. Two days before the trip began, an investor pitched in, and the team and crew began their journey at airports across the country, eventually converging to travel together toward their ultimate goal: the Kingdom of Nepal.



Photos thanks to Andy Cockrum and Eric Schlegel

Everest Info

**“Team Everest:
A Himalayan Adventure”**

www.teameverestthefilm.com

Gary Guller

www.garyguller.com

Spinal Cord Injury Centre-Nepal

www.sirc.org.np

Care Porter Nepal

www.careporternepal.org

Himalayan Rescue Association

www.himalayanrescue.org



Clockwise from left: Barry Muth is towed up the path by Sherpa porters; Matt Standridge puts his all into climbing a steep trail; brothers Robert and Gene Rodgers, with Gene secured to a doko; and Riley Woods (at bottom and on opposite page) at different points in the journey.



“Traveling can be burdensome for someone in a wheelchair, but you shouldn’t deny yourself the opportunity just because you might have to pack a couple of extra bags.”

—Riley Woods

He Ain't Heavy

One of those travelers was Riley Woods, an attorney who was then getting ready to begin law school and now practices in Waco, Texas, where he lives with his wife Rachel and their newborn son, Jackson. A paraplegic who'd been injured in a snow skiing accident while a junior at West Point in 1996, he'd met fellow team member and quadriplegic Barry Muth at a VA rehabilitation center in San Antonio. "When Barry told me about the trip, I immediately asked if there was any way I could get involved," Woods says, "so he checked into it and gave me a call, saying 'you're in if you want to be.' I knew this was something that I just couldn't pass up."



Andy Cockrum, at left, and Matt Standridge aboard a flight during their trek to the Everest Base Camp in Nepal. On next page team leader Gary Guller and team member Lakpa Sherpa, a Buddhist lama and arm amputee.

Still, the decision wasn't his alone to make. "I'm a pretty self-confident person, and I know my abilities and limitations, so I've got to remember not to get carried away and forget that other people will be affected by my choices, too, like my wife and family," he says. "Plus Rachel and I hadn't been apart for more than a day or two since we'd been married, and this was going to take a month."

The scene in the film where his wife describes her fears, but also her realization that she couldn't stand in her husband's way of achieving such an incredible goal, is "totally genuine," Woods says. "It was a very sincere and heartfelt gesture on her part to be able to let go like that, and I was very appreciative of her support."

Once the decision had been made, preparations began, and Woods and Muth were assisted by their physician, Mark Fredrickson, M.D., a quadriplegic with expertise in spinal cord injuries who helped them learn about expo-

sure and acute mountain sickness (see "TravelMD" column in this issue) and to determine the types of medicines and equipment they should take along. "He did a lot of research for us, which helped tremendously," Woods says, "so Barry and I were very well equipped by the time we set off."

On their arrival in Lukla, a village in the Khumbu region of eastern Nepal, the team met the Sherpa porters who would become indispensable to their success, especially to those in wheelchairs. While everyone made their best effort to proceed under their own power to the

extent that was physically possible, this is a trail that has turned back many a trekker with full mobility, so the Sherpa resorted to pushing, pulling, and even carrying the team members up the mountainside, when necessary. Sometimes actually lashing a man in his wheelchair onto their back, the Sherpa more often used a "doko," which is a deep woven basket used to carry heavy loads. Woods pushed himself along whenever possible, but at times he had no choice but to allow the porters to carry him. One day in particular stands out in his memory.

"The Sherpa who was carrying me part of the way in a doko decided that he needed a rest, and without any warning he set me down on a rock at the edge of a very high cliff," he says. "I started to tip forward, and for a second there I thought I was going over. I probably would've if two other guides hadn't run over and steadied me."

Woods says this was the only incident of its kind, and that it had more to do with the Sherpa's lack of experience with disabled individuals than carelessness. "As the trek

went on they started to realize our limitations and to figure out the best way to work through them," he says. "These guys were incredible, and I was never dropped once, which was my big fear. They did an absolutely spectacular job."

Technical Trials

One of Cockrum's big fears in committing to the project was that it might interfere with his primary filming schedule. "Before we left I was able to shoot about 15 hours of pre-trek interviews in my spare time, but I also had a great job working on feature films and didn't want a personal project to interfere with my work schedule," Cockrum explains. Luckily he found himself with a month-long break when the 21-day journey was finally scheduled to occur, and with the background interviews in the





I was able to sort of map out in advance the shots I knew that I'd need once I started," he says, "but it was still quite challenging to get set up for shots along these steep mountain trails."

Along with Nixon, his fellow cameraman, and three Sherpa assistants, Cockrum tried to set up an efficient system of filming, often involving splitting into two groups—one ahead of the team, and the other behind—so that activities could be filmed from either direction. Sometimes, however, there was simply no alternative to setting up at an attractive site ahead of the trekker's approach, filming as they passed, and then scrambling to catch back up with them. Observing these activities, Woods said he was impressed by both their expertise and their energy. "With all the running back and forth along the trail they had to do, they probably hiked twice the distance we did, which must've been brutal," he says.

can he was able to concentrate on what was actually taking place in Nepal.

With some 15 years of experience as a film editor and movie cameraman, this was Cockrum's first documentary, so he had to develop new approaches to capturing the images he knew would work best. "As an editor,

Still, working in real time—and totally without a script—was so hectic at times that there was nothing to be done except "run and shoot, shoot and run" Cockrum says. "But Reid and I really worked well together, and we'd usually find that what one shot either completed or complemented the other's footage, so that

OPEN DOORS ORGANIZATION

The ODO was founded to support creating a society in which all persons with disabilities have the same consumer opportunities as anyone else. It aspires to teach businesses how to succeed in the disability market, while simultaneously empowering the disability community. Through comprehensive research, training, and guidance in marketing strategies and ADA compliance, ODO gives large corporations and small businesses alike the tools they need to reach and serve the disability market. Through social action and research, ODO seeks to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

- **Mission:** To create equal access and opportunity for customers with disabilities.
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was great. We ended up shooting about 40 hours of film each, for a total of 80 hours in addition to the pre-trip footage we'd shot."

From a purely technical standpoint, this work was merely a preliminary step for Cockrum, gathering the raw material that he would then be responsible for actually crafting into a documentary film. On his return to the States—and at the end of his brief hiatus from working on Rodriguez's films—he was forced to snatch a few hours from his busy schedule whenever he could to work with the footage; an hour in the early morning before leaving for work, in the evenings, or on weekends. All told he says he worked on "Team Everest" for about five years before it was released by Danger Dog Films in 2008. The documentary was officially selected to appear at the Austin, Seattle International, and Vail film festivals, among others. It has also been aired on The Documen-

tary Channel and is available at its Web site (*see sidebar*) and on Amazon.com.

So, now that he's filmed his first documentary, does Cockrum plan to do so again? "Actually, I'm already working on a film about the Sherpa guides and their culture, and Gary's already talking about doing another trek to Africa or involving the Pan-American Highway in South America. He mentioned that they would probably take about three months each, so we'll have to see about that," he says with a laugh. "But this is a cinematic form that I've come to love, so I'm sure I'll be working more in that area in the future."

Heart and Mind

The team reached Everest Base Camp in March of 2003, sparking an emotional celebration involving the trekkers, the crew, and the members of the Sherpa support team. Not everyone made it to the end, with some lagging behind or turning back for various reasons. If success is judged on an individual basis, however, most who set out on this journey saw it through to the end. Riley Woods was one of those successful adventurers, and he says he will carry the gains made on the journey with him for the rest of his life.

"Traveling can be burdensome for someone with a physical disability," he says, "and especially for someone in a wheelchair. There's so much advance planning involved, and you can always come up with a list of 100 reasons for not doing something. But you shouldn't deny yourself the opportunity to travel and learn just because you might have to pack a couple of extra bags.

"What I took away from this is that you can't be afraid to get out there and do the things you want to do," Woods says. "You can accomplish anything that you put your heart and mind into, and I think you'll find proof of that in this film." ✍

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