

On Top of the World

By Mary Angell

For Dale Cottam, climbing a mountain is a metaphor for life.

“You take it one day at a time, break it into smaller pieces,” the Cheyenne attorney said about his hobby. “When you’re done, you can link up all the smaller pieces you climbed and you get a great sense of accomplishment that you made it all the way to the top.”

The same approach can be applied to challenging legal cases, or anything else a person wants to conquer, said Cottam, who practices energy and real estate law with Hirst Applegate, PC. He said his passion for mountain climbing helps him maintain balance in his life.

“It’s equally as intense as being a lawyer,” he said. “People who work hard ought to know how to play hard.”

Cottam has taken on many notable peaks in the United States – Mount Hood, Mount Rainer, Mount Meeker and many others in Colorado. He’s also climbed Pico de Orizaba (18,700 feet) and Iztaccihuatl (17,338 feet) in Mexico, as well as several peaks over 20,000 feet in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Most recently, in 2006, Dale attempted the 23,053-foot Spantik Peak in Pakistan.

The expedition was plagued with problems: lost luggage, equipment failure, adverse weather conditions. After reaching the third camp up the mountain, situated at an altitude of 20,500 feet, Cottam came down with the flu-like symptoms of altitude sickness. He spent the night before his team’s summit bid for Spantik violently ill, but still he climbed to 22,400 feet the following day, despite being weakened from severe vomiting. Finally, with a snowstorm threatening to move in and the summit still three hours away, Cottam and several other climbers turned back. He had come within 200 meters of reaching the summit.

“I was disappointed, but not awfully disappointed,” he said. “I thought about my family and I thought, ‘This is silly to go any higher.’ To go any higher, everything would have had to be perfect, but the weather conditions were bad – it was snowing – and the gear was not in good shape.”

Knowing no rescue was possible from the mountain’s highest campsite, Cottam mustered his strength to begin his descent the next day. He had gone without food and with little water for almost two days.

Cottam's children – three boys and a girl, are all under the age of 7 – were frequently in his thoughts as he climbed Spantik. He occasionally found strength from the small, brightly colored plastic hands they had stuck to his pack, telling him they were “helping hands” that would keep him going on the climb.

His wife Tamara, who is expecting twins in September, is very supportive of Dale's climbing, even though she doesn't share his enthusiasm for it.

“She's done some climbing, but it's not her idea of a really good time,” he said. “She understands that I have a real passion for travel, for climbing and the outdoors. She doesn't really push me on or encourage me to go on more trips, but she's very understanding. I get to go on a trip, travel to another country every other year, so it seems to work out.”

Cottam wrote in his journal that while he was ascending Spantik he also felt the presence of his father, who was also a climber.

“One of my earliest memories of my father climbing was being in the parking lot of the Mount Rainer National Park,” he said. “It was a record snow year and even in July, there were snow walls in the parking lot. I remember Dad saying, ‘I'm off to climb Mount Rainer.’ I remember looking at the mountain and saying, ‘That is a big mountain. I can't imagine taking such a long walk.’ He was gone for five days. He got back sunburned, snow blind and exhausted. I just remember how challenging it was for him to climb Rainer.”

Cottam started climbing when he was 5 years old, and he hiked a lot in Utah as a kid, continuing to climb with his father until the senior Cottam was no longer able. Stephen M. Cottam died in 1998, and in 2004, Dale and his brother Nathan climbed Mount Rainer in memory of their father.

“When I graduated law school, my father was still alive, and he came to visit me,” Cottam recalled. “I told him, ‘Now that I have a real job, I'm going to climb in the Andes.’ He said, ‘Dale, if you're serious about this, you'd better do it now. Before long it will be too late.’”

“I took it to heart,” Cottam said. “Two and a half years later, I went to Bolivia and had a very successful trip. I did something he always wanted to do but never got to do: summit some significant mountains in the Andes. I showed him my pictures and he was really excited.”

It's not as easy for Cottam's friends to share his enthusiasm for his sport; they sometimes just shake their heads at him.

“When I came back from Bolivia from the first serious international experience I went on, that was my only vacation for many years,” he said. “I came back to the office 10 to 15 pounds lighter, sunburned, exhausted, and I described my climb to someone who said, ‘Don't you think about a vacation where you just relax and lie on the beach?’ I said that would not be rejuvenating to me.”

Cottam's pictures from his expeditions help people understand why he climbs.

“Nobody but my climbing friends is really impressed with my accomplishments, but then I show them the pictures and I can share the experience with them through the pictures,” he said. “Their eyes glaze over with the lingo, but they see the photos and they say, ‘WOW.’”

He added modestly that it’s impossible to take a bad picture in some of the locations. Other times, he said, he gets lucky. His favorite photo of K2 – a clear shot of the peak against brilliant blue sky – was taken after ten days of non-stop snowfall. (Cottam did not climb K2, the second-highest mountain on Earth, but he and several others made a side trip to it following their Spantik attempt and spent several days at its base camp.)

Cottam is tentatively planning a climbing trip to Nepal in 2008.

“I don’t have a specific mountain in mind. I’d just like to go more for the experience of meeting the people and having the opportunity to photograph Mount Everest and some of those other groups,” he said.

Photographing Everest. Not climbing it?

“I have no interest whatsoever in climbing Everest,” Cottam said “Yes, I enjoy climbing, but the risk involved in getting there is just too great. It’s 8,828 meters, or 29,029 feet. That’s too high. It costs too much and the risk too great.”

He added that he’d also rather avoid the traffic to Everest’s summit.

“There are a lot of people at Everest,” he said. “People have lost respect for it. It’s lost some of its grandeur.”

Cottam’s other goals include climbing Alaska’s Mount McKinley and returning to Pakistan in 2012 for another try at the summit of Spantik. After all, he attempted 14,000 ft. Mount Democrat in Colorado seven times before making it to the top.

Other, non-climbing excursions will wait.

“I’ve never been to Europe, but I figure I can go when I’m 80 years old,” he said. “If I want to climb 7,000 meter peaks, I have to do it now.”

Mary Angell is a freelance writer from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and a regular contributor to the Wyoming Lawyer.

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