

Eric Weihenmayer

ERIC WEIHENMAYER grew up in Weston, Connecticut, a town in the northeastern United States, about eighty kilometers east of New York City. When he was thirteen, he became totally blind as the result of a rare genetic disease, retinoschisis.

When he was thirty-three, on May 25, 2001, Eric stood on the summit of Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. He was the first blind person to do this.

Before he went blind, Erik had been very athletic; he had played basketball and football; he had spent a lot of time on his bicycle and his skateboard. But after he lost his sight, he couldn't do any of these things. He felt frustrated for a while, but then he discovered wrestling—a sport where blindness was not a serious disadvantage. A few years later, he was good enough to participate in a national junior championship.

When he was sixteen, at a summer camp, Erik started rock climbing. Climbing was even better than wrestling: he could use his hands and the rocks didn't move.

After he finished high school Erik went to university in Boston —about 200 kilometers from Weston. He got a Bachelor's degree and then a Master's in education. When he graduated, he found a job teaching in a primary school in Phoenix, Arizona, in the southwestern part of the US. In the West, Erik had plenty of opportunities for rock climbing. He also took up ice climbing and mountaineering.

In the next few years, Erik climbed El Capitan, in California, one of most difficult rock climbs in North America, and Polar Circus, a high frozen waterfall in Alberta, Canada. He also summited, the highest mountains on five continents: in North America, South America, Europe, Africa, and Antarctica.

After so many successful climbs on difficult mountains, Erik began to wonder if he could summit Everest, but he decided that because of his handicap that would be impossible.

Then he met Pasquale Scaturro. Pasquale, who had already summited Everest, asked Eric if he wanted to do the climb, and Eric enthusiastically said he did. Pasquale said he would try to organize an expedition that included Erik. He would lead it himself. He applied to the National Federation of the Blind asking them to sponsor the expedition. They agreed and donated \$250,000.

Everest was first climbed in 1953. In the following fifty years, 147 climbers died on the mountain. Conditions on the mountain are very difficult. Climbers often get sick from bad food and water. Because of the extreme altitude, all climbers suffer from oxygen deprivation, which can cause mental confusion and may lead to falls and other accidents. Bad weather can lead to long waits in isolation and the extreme cold can cause frostbite.

The most dangerous part of the climb is not near the summit but lower down, on the 'Khumbu Icefall.' The icefall is a steep glacier that covers a long section of the route up Everest. The ice in the Khumbu moves several feet every year—much more quickly than glacial ice usually does. So the terrain is always changing and it is impossible to make permanent paths. Every expedition has to find its own way around huge blocks of ice and across deep crevasses.

The terrain on the Khumbu was by far the worst Erik had ever experienced. There were no paths, and because everything was so unfamiliar, it was impossible for him to use his sense of hearing and