

Connections

STORIES OF OUR LIVES

Higher Love

LaShonda Stone would do anything for her daughter—even climb 17,500 feet up Mount Everest.
By Stephanie Pearson

WORLD'S ROOFTOP

LaQuishia Stone, then 17, in front of Everest's summit.
Opposite page: With her mom, LaShonda, at a "rest stop."



UNTIL RECENTLY, LaShonda Stone had never trekked, never slept in a tent, and never crossed an ocean. The farthest from home the North Carolina native had ever traveled was Puerto Rico—and that was on a luxury cruise ship. The last time Stone thought about Mount Everest was in her fifth-grade geography class. And to this day, the name

Sir Edmund Hillary doesn't ring a bell. But on this frosty April afternoon in Nepal, the 34-year-old single mother of two is sprinting up a treacherous mountain path in the shadow of the world's highest peak, trying to escape a herd of ponies.

Not exactly black stallions, the plodding equines belong to the Sherpas, the Buddhist

people who migrated to the Khumbu Valley from Tibet more than 400 years ago, best known for guiding local trekking and climbing expeditions. This precipitous Himalayan corridor that runs along the Dudh Khosi and Imja Khola rivers is so high and rugged that it's off-limits to motorized vehicles. Whatever the Sherpas can't carry themselves, which

might be anything from sick climbers to 150-pound sheets of plywood, they haul by pony, yak, or a yak-cow hybrid called a *dzopkio*.

These ponies are harmless. But at 13,000 feet, where sucking enough oxygen to take a single breath is difficult, even a pony can go postal, or so it seems. The animals are gaining on Stone and her 17-year-old daughter, LaQuishia, so the two jump a rock wall, run into a thicket of blooming bell-shaped rhododendrons, and hide behind a boulder.

When one of their guides, Ang Nuru Sherpa, finally manages to shoo the ponies, the Stones' fear has melted into laughter. The mother and daughter, who look like sisters with their long black hair and slender physiques, are so doubled over that they have a new problem—finding a toilet in time to pee.

"I just knew those ponies were going to attack us!" says LaShonda, still in tears.

Welcome to Day 7 of a 25-day journey that will take the Stones 8,000 miles around the globe, from the comfort of Winston-Salem through the chaotic streets of Kathmandu to a temporary tent village that sits on a shifting pile of rock and ice at the base of Mount Everest. The trip will require LaShonda to ascend thousands of feet on foot and horseback. Anemic, she'll shiver through single-digit temperatures. She'll tweak her knee so badly that she'll barely be able to walk, and will eventually wind up in a makeshift ER where she'll be prescribed medication to rein in an irregular heartbeat. She'll will survive on soup and hard candy and miss her 15-year-old son so much that she'll cry at night.

Why the sufferfest? It turns out LaShonda will do anything to give LaQuishia a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And in this case, that means crawling up to 17,500 feet.

I

T ALL STARTED

with an essay contest. "What's your Everest?" Jamie Clarke asked the packed Carver High School auditorium in December 2009. The 42-year-old adventurer and entrepreneur

from Calgary, Alberta, was entertaining the school's 800 students with funny mishaps he'd had while climbing the Seven Summits. Clarke was in Winston-Salem to announce his new expedition—an interactive one.

The deal: The student who could best answer the question "What's your Everest?" by articulating his or her life goals in an



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essay would win a trek to the Mount Everest base camp, where Clarke would be launching his second Everest summit. Hanesbrands, the \$4 billion apparel company headquartered across town from Carver, would sponsor the expedition and provide trekking support consisting of Sherpa guides, a film crew, a journalist, and a faculty member from Carver. But the deal came with an all-or-nothing caveat: The winning student had to be accompanied by a parent, and the student, parent, and Carver faculty person (guidance counselor Theresa Hamer ended up being chosen) had to act as a team. If any one of them couldn't make it to base camp, they all had to turn around.

"For some people, trekking to Everest base camp is not a prize, it's a punishment," Clarke told his audience. "But some of the most powerful and rewarding experiences are the things you probably hated the most when you were doing them."

The speech clicked with LaQuishia, then a junior at Carver. "At first I thought it was a big joke," she says. The closest she had come to climbing a mountain was scrambling up a few fake rocks at an indoor gym. "But once I talked to my mom about it, she

made me realize this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

I am the best candidate for participating in the trek because I am a very adventurous person, she wrote in her essay. I have the hunger to go outside the box.... At age 12, on a dare from some buddies, LaQuishia had tried out for the football team and played tight and defensive end for two seasons. Despite her sports schedule, which includes a lot of hours on the road with an extracurricular AAU basketball team, she's been on the honor roll since the ninth grade. Her dream is to graduate from college with a business degree and become a music producer.

"I'm just waiting for y'all to call me, because I know LaQuishia is going to get chosen," LaShonda told the selection committee when they interviewed the finalists' parents in February. Later that month, the committee announced that LaQuishia had won.

LaShonda was thrilled for her daughter. But she had no intention of accompanying her to Nepal. In addition to raising her own kids, LaShonda had been caring for her niece and nephew while her sister, Freda Stone, served a five-year jail term. Now that her sister was out of jail, LaShonda was finally ▶

getting back on her feet, going to school for interior design and working with a state agency helping to rehabilitate mentally disabled adults and children. LaShonda didn't have time for Everest. And, unlike her daughter, she was no athlete. Her only form of rigorous exercise was a five-mile walk around the neighborhood three times a week. Instead, LaShonda's plan was to send LaQuishia's 38-year-old father, Carlos Williams. She thought the trip would be a good opportunity for him to get to know his daughter. Williams wasn't exactly a fixture in LaQuishia's life.

"I was trying to do something good, something from the heart," LaShonda says. "I wanted him to go so badly." But there was a problem. Because Williams owed more than \$2,500 in child support to four different women, the State Department denied his passport application. Soon after that he was sent to jail for a probation violation on a previous DUI charge. LaShonda's only option was to take LaQuishia all the way to base camp herself. She had one month to train, so she joined the YWCA and set the treadmill on "incline."



POPULAR

as it has become in the past 20 years, the trek to base camp is no walk in the park. The terrain is steep and rocky, severe altitude sickness is common, and the magic of the Himalayas can be overshadowed by harsh, unsanitary living conditions. This is a land where flush toilets are the ultimate luxury, hot showers are nearly nonexistent, and the menu, which includes quasi-American food like water buffalo burgers and fish pizza, can be tough on an uninitiated stomach.

The reality of Nepal hit the Stones at Tribhuvan International Airport. While waiting to clear customs, they watched Hindu women carrying heavy loads of bricks to a construction site in sweltering heat. In Kathmandu they watched kids sniffing glue

on street corners. And a few days later when they deplaned in Lukla, the village that marks the beginning of the trek to base camp, they saw porters crammed behind a fence, waiting to carry tourists' packs for roughly \$10 a day.

"I thought they were prisoners or something," says LaShonda. "They were begging for work, and I was really disturbed because they had no choice but to live like that. I've always looked at myself as Superwoman because I've had to overcome a lot of adversity," she adds. "But I e-mailed my sister and said, 'We think we're survivors? These people are survivors over here!'"

In the next ten days, LaShonda would find out just how tough the Sherpas really are. Her first major challenge: Namche Hill, a mile-long, 2,300-foot vertical climb that starts with a suspension bridge swinging over the Dudh Kosi River. With the trek leader, Ang Temba Sherpa, as her pack carrier, LaShonda would climb for 15 minutes, then rest; climb 15 minutes more, then rest again; climb for ten minutes and rest, all the while listening to contemporary gospel hymns on her iPod. Toward the end of the hill, LaShonda was stopping to rest after every few steps. "I was struggling because the air was so thin," she says. "But the songs kept me motivated. I knew I was depending on God, the creator of all that breathtaking scenery."

The next day, during a layover in the bustling village of Namche Bazar, she spent most of her time in bed to rest up for the trek to Kunde, where Sir Edmund Hillary built the region's first hospital. The pace didn't let up: The day after that was a long slog to Tengboche, a Buddhist monastery at nearly 13,000 feet. Worried that LaShonda would wear out, Ang Temba arranged for her to ride a horse up the steep four-mile path that, on one side, drops a few hundred feet into the Imja Khola River.

ARRIVAL Jamie Clarke welcomes LaShonda Stone to base camp. *Inset:* Guidance counselor Theresa Hamer and LaQuishia show up a few hours later.



"Every time I got on that horse, I prayed," says LaShonda. "I asked God to put a shield of protection around me."

Perhaps that protection came in the form of the reassuring view of Ama Dablam. The peak's name translates to "Mother's Locket," because the ridges fanning out from its sides reach like enveloping arms, and the mountain's hanging glacier looks like a *dablam*, a traditional pendant that Sherpa women wear.

Focusing on the scenery, LaShonda pushed through her fear, altitude sickness, and erratic heartbeat, a relatively benign condition she's had since childhood. As the days wore on, however, she became increasingly fatigued and lonesome for her son, J're, back in Winston-Salem. LaQuishia, on the other hand, powered through her aches, pains, and homesickness with comfort



food—Fanta and candy bars.

Every night, as the team sat down to dinner, they would play a game in which they'd sum up the day in six words. LaQuishia's words generally had something to do with food. ("Can I eat my Snickers now?" was a memorable line.) LaShonda had a knack for choosing words that said it all. A week into the trip, her selection was no exception: "Too late to turn back now."

B

Y THE NINTH

day, LaShonda had made it to 17,000-foot Gorak Shep, the last outpost before Everest base camp. The final stretch, just a few more

miles, required trekking up and down the boulder-covered hills of Khumbu Glacier, a massive body of ice that flows off the flanks of Mount Everest into the valley. The rest of the team, including LaQuishia, had left Gorak Shep at the crack of dawn to climb 18,300-foot Kala Pattar, from whose summit you can see unfettered panoramas of Everest, from base camp to peak. LaShonda would have to make her final push without any gentle nudging from her daughter.

A few hours later, LaQuishia arrived.

"When I got to camp there was Mama and Jamie standing at the top," says LaQuishia. "Just knowing that Mama had made it was a great feeling."

Later that evening, after the team had finally settled down enough to sleep, laughter rose up from the two-person tent nearest the latrine. It was LaQuishia once again in hysterics. In an effort to keep out the draft at 17,500 feet, LaShonda had hauled in their

The tents were so far away, they looked like Skittles scattered across a **FROZEN** **LUNAR LANDSCAPE.**

Starting out midmorning, LaShonda used the same strategy she devised to power up Namche Hill: She'd take a few steps, stopping every 15 minutes, which turned to ten, which turned to five. After a few hours, the wind was whipping, the solid rock was turning to ice, and though hundreds of tents were in view, they were so far away they looked like Skittles scattered across a frozen lunar landscape.

By the time LaShonda and her guide reached the MOUNT EVEREST BASE CAMP sign, mounted on a cluster of boulders strewn with disintegrating prayer flags, LaShonda could barely walk. At her pace, it would take at least another hour to trek the last half-mile to the Expedition Hanesbrands site, a dozen or so bright orange tents pitched at the base of Mounts Lhotse, Nuptse, and Everest. Having heard the news on the radio that LaShonda was close, Clarke and his climbing partner, Scott Simper, were waiting, waving their arms up and down like airport tarmac workers, directing LaShonda to her final destination.

"Jamie was the best sight I've ever seen," says LaShonda. "He had his arms wide open."

"She was almost like a wet noodle, she was so exhausted," says Clarke, who quickly took LaShonda to the ER tent for a checkup. "But spiritually, she was strong as a mother bear!"

two giant waterproof duffel bags from the vestibule and lined them up against the sides of the tent, leaving mother and daughter squashed in between.

"We couldn't move!" says LaQuishia. "Then my mom started messing around, naming all the crazy villages we walked through—Namche, Kunde, Tengboche, Pangboche, Pheriche, Gorak Shep—and we just couldn't stop laughing."

Wasted from their two-week battle with gravity, the two women finally dozed off, sleeping soundly until 7 the next morning, when the hot sun drenching the tent and the guttural sound of Buddhist chants blaring from a portable stereo in the next camp over woke them up. Rested and reveling in their accomplishment, LaQuishia and LaShonda spent their last day in camp joking with the team members, gazing at the views of Tibet, and anticipating tomorrow's hike back to Lukla, which would eventually lead to a hot shower in Kathmandu and the long flight home. As much as LaShonda wanted to get back to J're, a part of her wanted to stay right there, with the Sherpas and their magic mountains. At the top of the world, anything seemed possible. Somewhere between base camp and Winston-Salem, LaShonda would need to find a way to come back down to Earth. **Q**