

Voices from the mountain.

Blogs from Mount Kilimanjaro candidly talk about life above the clouds.

By Chris Hunt

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It was hard to tell at first, because the background sounds were buried beneath someone's voice, but singing could be heard. It was faint and muffled, like music heard underwater, but it was audible.

When Deana Johnston, a fourth-year nursing student participating in the climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, began her first audio blog from Africa, she inadvertently captured a church service in the background in which people could be heard breaking into song.

The sounds and tones wafting through the blogs offer a candid look at what the expedition members are experiencing in Africa.

The early posts were laden with excitement as climbers spoke about everything from how friendly the native population was to worrying about whether they packed everything on their lists. However, more than anything else, they spoke about the desire to begin the climb.

That was around a week ago, and a lot has changed since then. The expedition has made steady progress, and is currently above cloud level, fighting to get into position for a summit push.

The climbers, numbering 20 in total, have developed a daily routine for the early going of the climb.

"We're into three days of climbing now, and certainly a routine has been established. It's either hot or cold, that's all we know," blogged Sherry Poirier as she be-



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Members of the expedition gather for a photo prior to leaving. The going has been tough but steady.

gan to talk about life on the mountain.

A typical day sees the climbers get up at around 6:30 a.m. They pack their tents and have a hearty breakfast before checking their pulse and oxygen to make sure everyone is healthy.

After that, they bandage their feet and set off for the day's hike. Hiking has its own routine.

Visit www.algonquin-college-blogs.com/africa2009/ for all of the latest audio updates from the expedition team as they prepare for that final push to the summit.

"We hike and eat," says Poirier, "and we hike and eat and so it goes throughout the day."

They hunker down when the sun falls, which is around 7:30 p.m. It gets very cold at night.

"The investment in those

sleeping bags was truly worth it. Trust me." The smile in Poirier's voice manages to come through her blog loud and clear.

Like the unexpected church singing, surprising sounds are still heard through the blogs, but they aren't seeping in from the background. They are embedded in the voices of those who are blogging.

Deep, laboured breathing is audible on many of the recent posts. Some of the bloggers start speaking clearly, but then begin sucking in air at the end of a sentence, as though they had just walked up a steep flight of stairs.

This is common at high altitude as the body increases respiratory rate to draw in more oxygen. Air pressure is lower at high altitudes, which results in less air molecules being drawn in per breath. Other common symptoms of traveling at high altitude are dizziness, insomnia and headaches. While frequent

and even expected, these symptoms can make an ascent uncomfortable.

According to the blogs, a social network has developed that sees climbers relying on each other to get them through the day, including helping one another through difficult moments.

"I have once had mountain climbing described to me as a bit of a selfish sport, and there was no sense of that with these people," blogged Richard Vandentillaart. "Right from the moment we got to the trail people were watching out for one another."

For at least one climber, this social support system proved invaluable.

"We're about 12,000 feet and the last couple days of climbing have been quite interesting," said Louis Lamontagne in his audio blog. He later continued, "I have my daughter here with me and I have to admit yesterday's climb was quite tough for me. At one point I wasn't feeling too well."

But with his daughter Samantha's encouragement, he found the strength to fight through his discomfort.

This is Lamontagne's second trip to Mount Kilimanjaro with Small World Big Picture, having participated in a trip in 2006. He said that this social support "made a world of difference," and was something he didn't have during the previous trip.

How much that social network will influence who makes it to the top of the highest point in Africa remains to be seen.