

Looking forward to climbing carries me beyond my present limitations. I focus myself away from my illness to the peak of the mountain," explains Gregory Fowler. "It gets me up in the morning to down the necessary pills, eat a good breakfast and go to the gym."

That motivation has helped the 40-year-old Portlander through several serious battles with AIDS, and sustained him as he struggled to the summits of Mount Hood, Mount Adams and Mount St. Helens.

Now Fowler and 12 other climbers from Team Quest—an athletic program for people facing life-challenging illnesses—are setting their sights on majestic Mount Rainier, the toughest endurance climb in the contiguous 48 states.

At least 10 of the climbers will be people living with HIV and AIDS. Many of the people who have signed up so far have little to no alpine climbing experience.

"That's just part of the challenge for me," says Aaron Hornstein, one of the novice climbers. "This climb is a major goal, and by focusing on it and working toward it, I'll succeed even if I don't make it to the top."

Hornstein, 32, was put on an experimental cocktail of drugs three and a half years ago and sent home to die. Thing is, he didn't, and the drugs are still working today.

"I came back from the brink," he says. "Every day is a gift."

Fowler, on the other hand, has had little success with his drug regimens. He is currently taking 14 drugs, trying to find a combination that will help increase his red blood cell count.

"To be honest, I might have to drop out or be an alternate. Of all the people signed up for this, my health is the most precarious," he candidly admits. "But damn it, I'm going to go for it. I'm working with my doctor to stay as healthy as possible and I'm training for this climb."

Robin Brooks, a therapist at Project Quest, says that kind of attitude makes Team Quest a natural extension of Project Quest's mission statement. Project Quest is a nonprofit organization providing community-building, personal growth and immune function enhancement programs for people affected by chronic or life-threatening illnesses like breast cancer and HIV.

"We believe in the healing power of community," she says. "When people come together through sports and teamwork, the results are amazing and very powerful."

Hornstein agrees. "Team Quest isn't just

NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH

Team Quest offers challenges and community to combat illness and despair by Shona Dudley

about playing sports," he says. "It's a team of people with something in common to overcome. They support you when you struggle and celebrate with you when you succeed."

Hornstein credits Team Quest's other recreational activities with helping him regain enough strength and endurance to begin training for the Mount Rainier climb.

"Team Quest welcomes everyone and anyone—all skill levels can come and play," he says. "That makes it a nonthreatening way for people to get out, have fun and meet people."

Williams, 33, an art student, plays center field on the Team Quest softball team and coaches the volleyball team, and now Brooks has talked him into climbing Mount Rainier with her.

"We go backpacking and hiking together, and she asked me if I wanted to go," he says. "It's a great challenge. It forces me to commit to doing something every day to improve my health."

The challenge of setting and achieving physical goals over the next several months motivates other climbers, too. Aaron Knecht says he hopes the climb will reaffirm his belief that he can achieve a normal life span. But he points out that the last leg of the climb depends on mental toughness, not physical fitness.

"To keep climbing you've got to will yourself to keep going," he says. "If I can do that, I can do anything."

Knecht, 37, a chiropractor, and his partner, Andrew Fletcher, also 37 and a network manager for a major trucking company, will be training and climbing together. Knecht has been living with HIV since 1985, while Fletcher only recently learned that he is living with the virus. Both men maintain their health through a program of nutrition, immune system support, chiropractic care, acupuncture and other wellness strategies. Fletcher is creating a Web site that will include the program the duo follow and their progress as they train for the climb.

"Project Quest's philosophy is that you're not limited because you're HIV-positive," Fletcher says. "What better way to prove it than by climbing a mountain?"

For those with less lofty goals, Williams offers a different challenge: "Come try one of Team Quest's activities—that's how I got hooked. If you're not doing anything Wednesday night, come and watch a volleyball game. Same with softball—come and see what we're all about. What have you got to lose?"

■ For more information about TEAM QUEST, call Project Quest at 493-0288 or Ken Ballard at 412-6530, or send e-mail to oldsloupch@aol.com.



A recent Team Quest dance class

"It got me out of the house and involved with people," he says. "That's incredibly important. And doing something fun—volleyball, bowling and racquetball—got me moving. I've been slowly gaining back muscle mass. My stamina has been slowly building up and my lung capacity is coming back."

Team Quest hopes to field two softball teams during the upcoming season, and other programs include weekly dance and fitness classes, volleyball and bowling, as well as occasional day hikes and overnight camping trips.

Ken Ballard, Team Quest's founder, says plans are also underway for a week of backpacking in Utah and a sea-kayaking trip off Admiralty Island, Alaska, a place he dubs "home to the largest concentration of grizzlies and bald eagles in the world!"

He says, "We live in the Pacific Northwest. Obviously, we need to be outdoors."

Lusijah Marx, Project Quest's co-founder and now its voluntary clinical director, says she was surprised at how enthusiastic everyone was about Team Quest right from the start. But Tad Williams isn't surprised.

PROMOTING EMPOWERMENT

"Building community and building consciousness of health and well-being permeates everything we do," says Lusijah Marx, Project Quest's co-founder and volunteer clinical director.

She points to the project's weekly Wednesday night dinners as a good example. While providing hands-on nutrition classes geared to specific dietary needs of people with HIV and AIDS, the dinners also build community. People who are curious about Project Quest are encouraged to come, meet people and get their questions answered while they help prepare and enjoy a healthy meal.

"Project Quest is about empowerment and self-knowledge and community," says Tad Williams. "It helps me focus on my own well-being. It's a good place to tap into a lot of services and help myself."

Programs and services include guided imagery sessions, stop-smoking programs, stress reduction, and body and energy work. Groups focus on health management, spiritual renewal, chronic illness and pain management, and more. Project Quest also offers quarterly sweat lodges and occasional workshops and retreats.

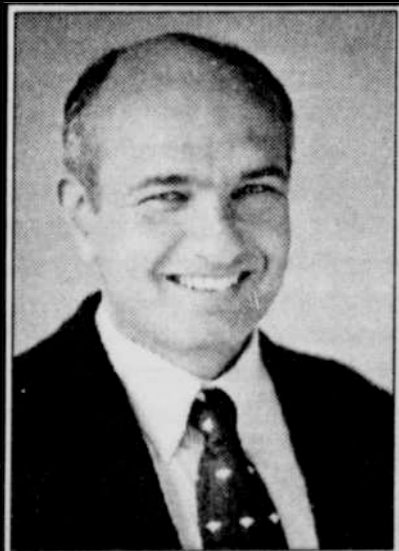
Project Quest collaborates with practitioners to offer acupuncture, Chinese medicine, naturopathic medicine and massage.

Veteran participants and volunteers act as mentors, helping newcomers decide which groups to join and which services to use.

"It was really important that I crossed paths with Project Quest," says Aaron Hornstein. "At a time I was really sick and becoming a recluse, they drew me out. They got me involved and meeting people. They make you look in the mirror and be honest with yourself, and they surround you with love and support. It truly is a community."

Project Quest is located at 3117 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Portland, OR 97212. For more information, call 493-0288 or fax 493-0289.

■ Reported by SHONA DUDLEY



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