

Teacher's sights on Mt Kili for a worthy cause

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ESTHER Masinga is off to Everest in 2020. She'll do it because she's put her mind to it, just like she told Sibusiso Vilane she wanted to go to Everest base camp with him this year.

Vilane, who is still on the mountain preparing for this third summit – this time without oxygen – on May 19, met the 45-year-old maths and science teacher from Rustenburg on the annual Trek4Mandela to summit Kilimanjaro last year.

He told her that he was putting together a team of climbers to travel with him to base camp and she leapt at the chance, but he insisted on making sure she was trained.

"I got the e-mail last November," she laughs, "I didn't hesitate, I said yes."

They started the trek to base camp, which is 5 384m above sea level, on April 6, arriving there on April 14. The next day, four of the seven climbers who had accompanied Vilane summited the nearby Kala Patthar. The peak, which means black rock in Hindi, stands at 5 643m. It was a particularly difficult climb.

"From Lobuche, the last overnight stop on the way to Base Camp itself, it was uncompromising terrain, it was tough, but not as tough as climbing Kili. Summited Kala Patthar though was like going from Kibo Hut to Uhuru Peak on Kilimanjaro, very tough, very torturous, very difficult."

Kala Patthar offers the best close-up views of Everest, Nuptse, Changtse and the Khumbu glacier.

"I felt so excited. We didn't stay long, because it was cold and windy... everything is frozen. We were on the summit for about 20 minutes taking pictures."

It was on the descent that her climbing partner – Mrs South Africa Nicole Capper – developed altitude sickness and had to be airlifted off the mountain. She has since made a full recovery. "I was lucky," says Masinga, "just like Kili, the altitude doesn't seem to affect me."

She and Capper revelled in seeing snow for the first time. "On our way up to base camp, as we left the tree line, we started playing in the snow. It was the first time I'd seen snow, ever touched it. We were like kids, the other climbers just looked on and laughed."

After a night in base camp, it took four days to complete the descent and then fly back home.

Now, her next challenge is Kilimanjaro itself on July 18, the 100th anniversary of Madiba's birthday. Kilimanjaro is the highest free-standing peak in the world and the highest mountain in Africa at 5 895m – 500m higher than Everest base camp.

"I'd like to do the double summit like Sibusiso did last year, for no other reason that I'm a woman, we're disadvantaged and I want to show the kids back home that we can do exactly what men can do," she laughs.

She's the head of the maths and sciences department at Matetenene secondary school in Rustenburg, married with three children, the oldest of whom is studying law at the University of Pretoria.

In between raising a family and working, Masinga has been studying continuously from her first degree at the University of North West to a B Ed (Hons) from the University of Johannesburg, to the University of Pretoria for her master's, qualifying too as a provincial maths examiner for the North West.

"I've been climbing since 1996. I've travelled all over the country doing hikes and trails. In September 2016, I did the Fish River Canyon in Namibia.

Out to make a difference to poor pupils' lives



Esther Masinga and reigning Mrs SA Nicole Capper pose for a picture in the freezing air after summiting Kala Patthar in the Himalayas. PICTURES: SUPPLIED

It's the largest canyon in Africa and I've hiked in Mozambique and Swaziland too."

In 2015, she summited the highest peak in South Africa, Mafadi, which is 3 420m high on the border of South Africa and Lesotho.

"I love it. Hiking gets me in touch with nature. It's my passion, I'm adventurous, I do mountaineering, hill walking or rock climbing whenever I'm free. It gives me peace of mind, it makes me strong."

Last year she summited Kilimanjaro on her first attempt.

"I reached the peak. It was hard, challenging, but through experience and training, I was able to do it – which is why I want to try the double summit this year."

For Masinga it's not just about the personal challenge, but also inspiring the children she teaches – and making a difference to their lives. When she climbed to Everest base camp, she raised funds to buy school shoes for her pupils. "I teach in a very deprived area. It's a poverty-stricken area – all we can do as teachers is to show that we love them. We still use pit toilets; the children don't have uniforms. One boy comes to school in torn trousers with no underwear, with his backside visible, but no one laughs at him because everyone understands being poor."

Reaching Everest's base camp will make a difference for him and others like him.

Caring4Girls, under whose auspices Trek4Mandela is held, will make a difference to schoolgirls who might otherwise have to miss up to a fifth of their high school careers because of the taboos still associated with menstruation and the shame of not having access to feminine hygiene products.

Last year, she set herself a target of collecting sanitary pads to support 1 500 girls, but ended up supporting 2 268. "I collected 9 072 pads in 2017. I'm going up the mountain again this year to get even more. We have to invest in our children. I'm passionate about them, I'll do anything to make sure they have the basics to make the most of their lives. They're our future – we have to help them."

When she gets back, she will barely have time to clean her hiking boots and air them before hitting the trails under Vilane's guidance.

Vilane has already summited Everest from the north and the south, he's about to try to get to the top this time – through the death zone of only 30% of the oxygen that there is at sea level – without using bottled oxygen, just like Reinhold Meissner did for the



Esther Masinga, right, and Sibusiso Vilane pose with a South African flag inscribed "Rest in Peace, Winnie Mandela" on April 15, after summiting Kala Patthar in the Himalayas. Everest looms behind them.

first time in 1978.

His next challenge will be to lead an all-African party of climbers to Everest in 2020, but with an added difference. All the training will be done in Africa, not in Europe or the Himalayas.

His dream is to take mountaineers to Africa's seven summits which all lie in East Africa, mimicking the international mountaineering checklist of the world's seven summits.

"I was joking about taking a 7SummitsAfrica team to climb Everest with some friends, who immediately said 'we can make it happen'. We had our first meeting in January to discuss and plan the project. We want to promote Africa. Africa has all the resources needed to train climbers for Everest. I was climbing in Uganda and I thought the glacier I was on was just like the Alps (in Europe)."

The technical challenges are there too. "Mt Kenya was one of my toughest mountains to climb," he says. "In fact, I would like to do K2 (the world's second highest peak) because of the technical skills I have learnt over the years, which ultimately helped me successfully summit Mt Kenya."

For Masinga, Everest will be the achievement of a much-loved dream.



Esther Masinga celebrates after summiting Kala Patthar in the Himalayas last month.

"I have agreed, I will go with him to Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania and Mount Kenya."

The next time she's at base camp, it will be passing through on the way to the top of the world.

●To help Esther Masinga make a difference to her pupils' lives, please call her on 082 475 7959 or e-mail massingas@yahoo.com.

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