

Jill Wheatley overcomes brain injury and blindness as she runs and climbs Nepal's mountains



Shashwat Pant
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Wheatley running around the Khumbu region with Ama Dabalm and Everest in the background. Courtesy: Jill Wheatley

Laying in a hospital bed watching the Rocky Mountains in Colorado in 2016, [Jill Wheatley](#) had given up on life. In 2014, she was hit on her head with a baseball while teaching students the sport in Bavaria, Germany, suffering a [traumatic](#)

with the fact that she would not see with one eye, left her wanting to die.

However, after spending two years in seven hospitals across three countries, Wheatley now lives life one day at a time as she has embraced and accepted that her life has changed.

When she got out of the hospital, she only had 30 per cent vision. But, from within, she had none. She loved the outdoors and had committed her life to it, but the injury had left her without a goal. “Things were very dark,” says Wheatley. “But, thankfully, even when I had given up, people around me did not. And, that is why I am here today.”

Just before she got out of the hospital, the Rocky Mountains inspired her to do something that, back then, was merely a dream – run in all the [major mountain ranges](#) in the world within a year.

“It was ambitious, but maybe due to the mountains’ tenacious and resilient nature, I was attracted to them. And, that is how my life started to turn around.”

That is what brought her to Nepal in 2017. And since then, she has always been back. She runs in the mountains, treks, and when given the chance, even skis. Recently, she reached the summit of Ama Dablam and now has plans to reach the top of the eighth highest mountain in the world, Manaslu.

The lifeline of running



She's trekked around both the Annapurna and the Everest regions. Photo: Vinayak Jaya Malla

"I fell in love with Nepal from the moment I got here. Not just the mountains, but the people too... everything about this country feels great."

During her first visit, all she wanted to do was trek around Nepal. But, she was convinced by a friend to take part in [Annapurna 100](#), a trail race that started in Pokhara and ended at Sikles.

She had never run in the mountains and was only getting used to her new life. But, when she stood on the starting line, she felt that is where she belonged.

"Initially, it was quite daunting as it started at dawn and ended after dusk when it was pouring down. But, as I got going, I started to have fun and ran and ran and ran."

At the end of the 50km race, when she reached the finish line, she was shocked. Only two had crossed before her. Wheatley, who had never run a mountain race, to everyone's and most importantly her surprise, had come third.

ten months ago, Wheatley was in a hospital bed. The doctors had told her if she did not start developing a will to live, she would die. But, here she was, running in the high mountains of Nepal with athletes from all across the globe. Not only did she run, but she also competed and that started to fill her with confidence.

“I came third behind Mira Rai and a french lady. It was unbelievable,” she says.

Inspiring self



Jill Wheatley climbing around Annapurna region. Photo: Vinayak Jaya Malla

After Annapurna 100 in 2017, she was invited to take part in a stage race around the [Manaslu Circuit](#) in the same year. Initially, she was sceptical as she had a plane to catch, but after a bit of thinking, she was on her way to Aru Ghat.

“These races in Nepal connected me to a lot of people. I also started to be a bit more open to talking to people about what I had been through as well. I gave a

She says that she never does anything to inspire people, but does things to inspire her to get going and grow. But, when she hears people from around the world say how she has helped them during their bad times, she says, it feels good.

“I still have bad days because not all days are pretty alpine pictures. I always tell myself, today might have been a bad day, but it’s not necessary that tomorrow will be the same.”

After finishing the Manaslu race, she knew she would be back in Nepal. But, before that, she had to finish her goal of visiting all mountain ranges. As soon as she finished it, she rushed to Colorado to meet and thank her team of doctors and nurses who got her up and running.

“That was emotional. I still talk to a few of them.”

Realising change



That is when she decided that her life had changed and with that her goals. With mountains in the back of her mind, after spending a few months in Europe trying to ski, she was back in Nepal in 2019 to climb the Island Peak and Lobuche. Apart from that, she was also helping out in trail races and ice climbing festivals.

“I help out Lizzy (Hawker) and Richard (Bull), but I like it here because I love the mountains,” she says. “They are therapeutic.”

As she was preparing to leave, Covid-19 locked down the world as life threw another curveball. In a bid to avoid spending time in the city, Wheatley along with a few mountain guides left for the Annapurna to go skiing.

“Being in the mountain makes you focussed. You can’t be thinking about anything else. No mind wandering. That is why I wanted to go there.”

She was there for a while, but authorities cracked them down and before she knew it, she was back in Kathmandu spending the lockdown alone at a rented apartment.

“It was frustrating, but I’m glad it is over.”

With the lockdown over, and with Nepal mountains open again, she with Vinayak Jaya Malla, an [IFMGA-certified mountain guide](#) left for Ama Dablam as a practice before she headed to Manaslu.



Wheatley watching the sunset from a high camp in Mardi Himal. Photo: Vinayak Jaya Malla

“It was great. Just two of us climbing to the summit was just breathtaking. It’s a memory that’ll stay with me forever. It healed me in so many ways.”

Now, her sights are set on climbing Manaslu in the autumn as she continues to push herself. Along with that, she has also been a part of a few digital conferences in Nepal where she spoke to other differently-abled people about injuries and recovering from them.



A jubilant Wheatley stands on the summit of Ama Dablam. Photo: Vinayak Jaya Malla

“It’s been great to be part of that. To be able to share my story with people who have been through something similar or something worse is humbling. I hope I get to do more of that.”

When asked if she had ever thought of climbing Everest, she says she gets this question a lot but is not sure just yet.

“Maybe someday I will, but for now I’m taking it one step at a time.”



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