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Mountaineer Jill Wheatley ascends Manaslu, the eighth-highest mountain in the world at 8,163 metres, in the Himalayas.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

## Visually impaired mountaineer's tall task more than overcoming world's highest peaks

JORDAN SMALL

CANMORE – Twenty-six months after the near-death accident that stole 70 per cent of her vision, Jill Wheatley anxiously adjusted to a new reality where her autonomy was slipping away.

Leaving the hospital in 2016, Wheatley froze inside. She had experienced major vision loss, had trouble working cognitive functions like writing a note, memory loss, and her driver's licence had to be surrendered.

A sudden realization yanked roughly on the newly released patient's collar as her mind raced about what she would do now.

"My whole story is so complicated," said Wheatley. "Any novelist could not make this up and I'm living it."

Now in Canmore – albeit temporarily – Wheatley reflected on the mighty tall task she's set for herself, which as brought her to the Canadian Rockies.

Colossal mountains have always intrigued the outdoorsy Ontarian. Following her time in hospitals, she retreated to the Nepal, one of her favourite destinations, where life – perhaps a new beginning – changed everything again.

Fourteen peaks in the world stand above 8,000 metres. For Wheatley, she's become determined to ascend them – not for records or fame, but instead, to use as a tool to inspire and motivate others and break down the stigmas she faces since the accident.

"I feel like life's prepared me for hard stuff," said Wheatley. "Those 26 months in hospitals and so much darkness, that was not a choice, but now I'm choosing to put myself in these situations where I'm being challenged physically and mentally. I've been through worse, not by choice."

Naturally, Canmore, an ice/mountain climbers paradise, was the spot to go for her first lessons. As it turns out, the training and community were so good to Wheatley that she decided to return to town before the start of the second half of Vision 8,000, her project to ascend the 14 highest peaks while breaking down barriers.

Assisting in preparation for frozen peaks and mixed terrains is renowned local ice guide Sean Isaac. The mountain man is diligently passing on vast knowledge of the technical side of things, providing the know-how on dealing with the ice and mixed terrain web

Wheatley will come across.

"The climbing that she is partaking here in the Canadian Rockies is much harder technically than anything she might encounter on the 8,000-metre peaks so when she is at high-altitude and tired and cold, the actual climbing difficulty should not be an issue," said Isaac. "It will just then come down to her fitness and mental strength."

One thing about Isaac appreciates about Wheatley is her quiet determination.

"I really appreciate her calm, focused demeanour and enthusiasm to learn and progress," he said.

"To have her winter ice skills dialled so when the fatigue, cold and altitude are bearing down on her then she can give all her focus to those factors and not be held back by the technical systems."

The blueprint for Vision 8,000 emerged the shame and painful memories that she no longer wanted to hide. And if she was going to share her story, it would be an all-in approach – the reality of a brain injury and internal wind storms.

"I often use the analogy: the avalanche that came in the wake of the brain injury," she said.

"Being vulnerable, being authentic, I feel creates connections ... I think that is healthy and breaking down the stigma is only going to happen if we educate people."

"Even though I'm no longer a teacher in the literal sense, by doing what I'm doing I can teach other people. I often talk about the power of prospective and possibility."

On the day of the sports accident, Wheatley was a living in Germany and working as a high school physical education teacher in Bavaria.

Growing up in northern Ontario, an active lifestyle was instilled in Wheatley's upbringing. She would often be outdoors.

It was a cold and wet day and some teachers chose to keep their classes indoors, but, as she grew up, the adventurer took her class outside.

All it took was a split second.

The class was learning baseball on that cool and damp morning in September 2014. After warming up, the students broke off into small groups broke. The teacher was talking to one group as others played with baseball bats and balls.

PEAKS

CONTINUED ON A28



# Mountaineer has eight peaks remaining on to-do list

## PEAKS

CONTINUED FROM A25

Close by, one student swung a baseball bat and connected with a baseball, sending a fast-moving line drive toward an unsuspecting Wheatley. The teacher was struck on the right side of the head by the hard ball. Things immediately went dark as Wheatley's right eye completely closed shut and it felt like her head was going to explode.

Knowing she was badly hurt and desperately needed help, she fought to stay conscious and calmly told her students to run the school for help.

Under the bright lights at the doctors, the medical professionals figured her painful injury was nothing more than a simple black eye that would eventually heal. The type of thing that would make for a great conversation-starter over the next month.

Still with a closed eye that would never reopen, Wheatley told herself to be tough and accepted the medical judgment; however, she still felt something life-

threatening was happening below the surface.

A few days later, she returned to the same hospital and then was quickly placed in an ambulance and rushed to a neurological trauma centre.

After another review, doctors found that Wheatley's skull was fractured and her brain was bleeding and swelling. Due to the dangerous severity of the issue, the medical team focused on Wheatley's brain and not her right eye.

The near-death accident resulted in 70 per cent of vision loss, and a gruelling 26 months spent in seven hospitals in three countries, where Wheatley described herself as a nightmare patient who would throw and break whatever she could get her hands on – at least toward the end of the 26 months.

In her darkest hour, colossal peaks and icy challenges called to Wheatley.



Vision 8,000's Jill Wheatley inches up an ice wall at Haffner Creek in Banff National Park. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Now nearly half way through Vision 8,000 – ascending mountains such as K2 and Makalu in 2022 – the mountaineer is in the projected final year of crossing off the peaks on her list if Mother Nature cooperates. She uses trusted guides from overseas during expeditions, which she said were all extremely safe.

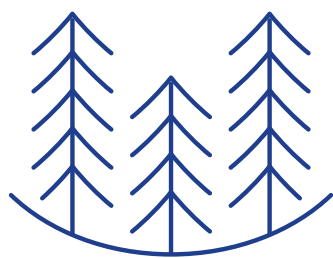
Eight mountains remain on Wheatley's list and two she hopes to cross off soon are Annapurna I, in north-central Nepal, and the famous Mount Everest, the largest mountain in the world.

However, Wheatley would avoid the circus around the 29,028-foot mammoth if she could. In other words, you won't catch her drinking a cappuccino at the base of Mount Everest.

"That part is hard for me, that there's going to be so many people and the commercialization of it," said Wheatley. "It's the peaks like Kangchenjunga and Dhaulagiri where there's no other teams there. I'm standing on the summit with no one else. That's my jam."

Believe it or not, climbing the world's highest peaks isn't the difficult part in Wheatley's journey – it's fundraising.

Because of this, a GoFundMe page called Vision 8000 was started for Wheatley as she continues her journey to break down stigma associated with traumatic brain injury, vision loss, and eating disorders.



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