

# Climb Against the Odds for High School Educators

**Objective:** to provide various learning opportunities for high school students using the hook of an interesting story. Individuals, age 18 to 65, undertake to climb some of the world's highest, most challenging mountains, in an effort to fight breast cancer, both personally and for their communities at large. They climb against the odds. Students will learn why they climb and consider many aspects of climbing that can teach them useful tools and inspire them to think in new ways about how they live.

**Audience for this content:**

Students in grades 9-12 interested in mountain climbing, mythology, symbology and its use in art and community, how distance and location is identified and understood on a mountain terrain, a psychological framework for seeing or understanding themselves, teamwork, elements of the earth's atmosphere and health.

**Recommended courses/subject areas for this material:**

1a. For an English class designed to teach advanced comprehension, vocabulary, syntax and a style of writing (structure) which presents a coherent point of view. Students will be challenged to write about the climb and compare it to the structure of a myth.

The climb is a metaphor and follows the typical unfolding of a myth. Students can read one or several of Joseph Campbell's books (See biography below) and discuss the ways in which the climb does parallel mythologies, both in giving the climbers a way to get on top of/rethink the meaning of their disease as well as in providing a means to live out a hero's journey (myths live in the present as well as the past!).

Students can also apply the stages of the journey--the call to adventure, wanting to refuse the call, agreeing to undertake the passage, preparing for the journey, encountering forces of evil outside (the elements) or demons within the self (e.g. weakness, doubt, fear of the unknown) crossing the threshold and going beyond, letting the old self fall away, bringing in new possibilities and new ideas of oneself (the flags), and finally, returning to the community in a new way. In the case of the climbers, they return, moving beyond the world of the self to a bigger idea, how to take compassionate action towards the larger community, and do what they can to prevent breast cancer.

1b. In an English or psychology class, students can be challenged to apply another model, that of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to themselves. In this model, a psychological framework is presented, identifying a hierarchy of needs common to all people. The needs start with the most basic, *the physiological* (water, food, sleep, warmth, exercise) to *safety/security* (physical safety, economic security, free from personal threats) to *the social* (belonging: acceptance, being part of a group, identifying with a successful team) to *ego needs* (esteem from important projects, recognition from others, prestige and status) and finally, to *self-realization*, (choosing innovation at the highest level, one's own opportunities for learning, etc.). The model suggests that each of us functions largely at one level and struggles to complete it before the next level of tasks can be

successfully broached or met. It's perhaps not just a model but a compass to ourselves.

For example, students can use the model to write about how it applies to them, and their observations of its relevance to those climbing against the odds. Key questions might be: Are there advantages to using this model versus others and any disadvantages? What does it have to teach us about ourselves? What does it say about teamwork? Ultimately, the students could be challenged to learn ways to listen to and work with this awareness of themselves.

2. For a class whose subject is learning effective health management skills, students would learn about nutrition through the experiences of the climbers. Understanding what food to take with them and what to eat when is vital as is preparation in terms of physical readiness, and good sense when making a climb. Students will look at charts and monitor their own food intake and compare it to that of those in optimum condition, those of the climbers. What it takes to be a survivor on a mountain against the forces one finds there is also content for this section. Understanding the mountain's requirements (guarding against hypothermia, lack of oxygen, altitude sickness, etc.) will give insight on why it is important to be nutritionally and physically prepared.

In addition, there is material created through a peer education project at 'zerobreastcancer.org.' that informs students what they need to do in order to prevent getting breast cancer. This is an important means by which breast cancer advocates can get their message of prevention out to high school audiences. Showing the documentary or getting one of the climbers in to talk to the kids could be the hook to get kids excited about the steps necessary to get healthy.

3. For an art class whose subject is to teach students the skills of seeing and visual vocabulary (principles of design) as well as comparing and contrasting works of art, probing beyond the obvious and identifying psychological content found in symbols and images. In addition, the material is well-suited to lead students toward investigation and discussion of universal concepts expressed in works of art from diverse cultures.

The art from the mountain climbs are found in the consistent use of the prayer flags. Students can research their origins, the varied use of symbols and naming in other cultures such as aboriginal art, and its powerful use in this context, where a community event is celebrated and a spiritual message invoked. After this discussion and research, students can be challenged to create their own prayer flags, considering the use of materials and designs which best represent the themes and information explored.

Interestingly, each mountain also has its own mythology. So students might also be encouraged to find the mythologies that exist for each of the mountains climbed (Aconcagua, Fuji, Shasta, Rainier) and incorporate symbols and themes they find here as well (See resources below).

4. For a science class, students can explore science and earth science material through

some of the typical assessment work that mountaineering requires. For example, you're on a mountain but where are you? Students will learn about latitude and longitude as a way of locating themselves on the mountain. Perhaps some of the technology of GPS's and their utility can also be explored.

### **State Requirements for High School Education**

See handouts.

### **Background Context:**

Women with breast cancer climb mountains. Why do they do it? Contrary to what might be initially judged (why climb when you're sick), their motivations are not fatalistic but instead are remarkably hopeful and positive to others. These women find the strength and courage to come face to face with their fears while also listening hard to what they are realistically able to do (in other words, confronting themselves honestly). In the end, whether they summit or not, all are strikingly determined to help the cause--putting a stop to the incidence of cancer.

In this documentary, a small group of mostly women climb Mt. McKinley, a mountain in Alaska, also known as Denali and one of the toughest mountains to climb in the world. Each has their own story, and prepare for the climb. They learn that once on the mountain, they are a team, and that their only way through is to work as a team, taking one step at a time. That is what steadies them in the fight against breast cancer and also what steadies them to confront the challenge of McKinley.

Mt. McKinley was the second climb of a climb that has happened every year, since 1995. Other climbs have taken survivors of breast cancer and their supporters to Mt. Fuji in Japan, Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina, Mt. Shasta, in California and Mt. Rainier, in Washington.

### **Using the DVD:**

The contents of this DVD not only inspire us with the challenges the climbers take on but also teach us about the risks of getting breast cancer due to toxins in our environment as well as some approaches we all might take to ensure our own safety and health.

The material on the DVD includes two versions of the video (90 minute and 4 minutes), *Climb Against the Odds*, and a look at some smaller climbs that should be reviewed for high school appropriateness. The use of additional material can extend the material for students in any number of directions (See Below).

### **Additional material**

The DVD includes content that may be useful in student work, both on the DVD itself and through links to the Climb Against the Odds website.

#### ***DVD Content:***

1. Full-length feature, Climb Against the Odds
2. Special features: a look at the other climbs
3. Vassar Environmental Risks Educational Tool: A look at the risks of environmental exposures to breast cancer during different stages of life.
4. Other links that highlight what is currently being done in the area of prevention: Nutrition and Health (foods, exercise and other ways to prevent Breast Cancer through self-protection), tools and information about toxic chemicals in our environment (cosmetics, household contamination, plastics)

### **Bibliographic Resources**

#### **Books (Amazon links) and articles**

[Mt. Shasta](#) (Stories and myths of Mt. Shasta, and a chapter on symbols and myths), Michael Zenger:

[Climbing Mt. Shasta](#) Avalanche Gulch.(about climbing and what you need: altitude, food, climbing distance and time, mountain sickness, weather, safety, climbing gear, Steve Lewis

[The Climb of My Life: a miraculous journey from the edge of death to a victory of a lifetime](#), Laura Evans, leader of the first expedition on Aconcagua

[The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#) (mythology explained, including Native American myths), Joseph Campbell

[Man and his symbols](#) (ancient myths and modern man, which examines symbols as they appear in myth and culture, and symbolism in the visual arts, the progression of sacred symbol to art), Carl Jung

[Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Classroom Ideas](#)

Women on Top, reaching for Mt. Shasta's Summit, Christina Ammon (pdf file)

Cancer: 101 Solutions to a Preventable Epidemic

Living Downstream: a scientist's personal investigation of cancer and the environment, Sandra Steingraber

#### **Other Media**

[Zero Breast Cancer](#) Peer Education Lesson Plans on breast cancer created by and developed for teensv (Grades 9-10)

Rachel's Daughters: Searching for the Causes of Breast Cancer

Heart of the Sea: a woman from Hawaii gets breast cancer from holding onto a pesticide spraying truck as a child to help her skateboard

River of Broken Promises: Actor Martin Sheen narrates this documentary about the health hazards of the New River and the demands of the people: government

accountability and community right-to-know laws about toxic hazards.

If You Love Our Children (Canada, in production)

A video explaining the issues in everyday language and present safe alternatives to harmful substances in the air, water, food and soil. Young People, health professionals, researchers and activists are profiled.