

Alyssa and I are at a loss at sharing the significant impact our Colorado trek had upon us, our team mates and others at large. Our story is just one perspective among countless others; if only we could bring all of them to you. We'd like to thank each of you who supported, encouraged, laughed in disbelief, pitied and/or prayed for us. You know which category you fit under.

~Mary Schoessler

World T.E.A.M. (The Exceptional Athlete Matters) Sports 2011 Adventure Team Challenge Highlights:

We survived and all teams finished with no medical emergencies. My first, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore Toto" moment came on Training Day. I was spotting my team member, who is paraplegic, on a rugged incline. If his biked tipped, my job was to push him and his bike back up against the mountain so we didn't go down. He tipped; I lost my footing and while using my full body to push him back upward, slammed straight down into a large cactus plant. Grateful to get back to camp that night with a leg full of cactus spines and nothing sprained or broken, I quickly found tweezers and antibiotic cream far more soothing than any glass of pinot grigio.

The trek was more dangerous than I expected, particularly given the diverse levels of ability and disability throughout the teams; 'Adventure' earned its rightful place. The Colorado River was running at a record 100 yr flood stage (10,000 + cubic ft per second) so rapids were raging, giving us several thrilling 'TV tourist commercial' rafting moments and forcing team organizers to change the course design. The rugged, elevated terrain constantly reminded us we were in the Rockies, far away from sandbox play of Midwestern inner city biking paths and rolling country gravel roads. Our reliance on compasses to navigate the course, figure out where we were and had to go, helped us reach all 15 checkpoints. A missed checkpoint docked an hour of race time. Steadfast, safe, straight-away, smart, strength in numbers—that was us. Fast, not so much. I know at least a couple of you are now thinking I should throw a compass in my briefcase.

On Day One, each team chose two members to do a canyon hike, traversing a narrow and winding, sometimes disappearing, path used by miners in the 1800s, high above the river. As I led my team mate Bill, who was blind/deaf, I noted the synchronicity between our partnership and my recent detached retina and upcoming cataract surgeries (which I conveniently neglected to share with him). It was an amazingly rewarding experience for both of us, requiring full engagement of mental, physical and sensory focus. More than once I thought we should be wearing life jackets—if we slipped and survived the fall, the river current would kill us. I soon realized heat stroke would've bubbled up underneath a lifejacket, tempting cliff-jumping into cold, turbulent waters.

I ran out of water/electrolytes by the end of this hike, grateful to my sharing team mate and having missed another 'what if' moment. Morning and evening gear packing for self sufficiency and preparedness (ropes, food, emergency medical & bike supplies, sunscreen, bug spray) accompanied generous handouts to keep the team strong and forward moving. The first thing I packed was my asthma inhaler but I never used it, not bad for a girl who couldn't run three blocks without needing it back in March—a small trophy for my lungs. Forced to overcome my porta potty and peeing-in-the-woods resistance, I will always honor the women who directed me to the 'Queen's Throne', a temporary toilet with tissue. Finally, camouflaged dignity behind a large boulder!

Alyssa and I were in better physical shape than I thought, particularly since we'd only been training for four months. Having said that, my team's goal was to complete vs. compete, decreasing some of my high performance pressures. I recognized that as a concession for several of my highly competitive and capable team members. The winning teams (hosting some incredible world champion athletes) did the event in six hours; our teams took over 12. Alyssa and I both had strong 'pack mule' men on our teams who did the heavy lifting, transporting and pulling the one-off bikes to assist team members with disabilities. Occasionally, all I could offer was mountains of gratitude.

Fortunate to be part of a high level, functioning and collaborative team, we shared attributes of mental, physical and empathy strengths, albeit in different compartments. Mind, body, spirit—it didn't take long to figure out attitude and endurance can overcome any ability or disability. Night time continued to test our patience and appreciation for simple creature comforts as constant rumbling trains, barking dogs and late night reggae partiers shared our campground space.

Before the race started, one of my team mates said "Alyssa's the 'wild card' of the group; we have reservations about how she's going to do out there." At the close of Day One, a team mate of hers found me, "Your daughter is amazing; she totally rocked it out today." Alyssa also did the canyon hike with her Captain, perfect validation of why I knew going into this I had to let go and trust others. Serving on separate teams gave us each a shared, yet individual experience. That hike would've taken a few extra twists if the two of us had trekked it together with my incessant "OMG, be careful!" Mom mantra adding understated stress. Alyssa sustained her enthusiasm and managed to rock out some great photos, sharing her story of participation through the observation lens of her beloved camera. For 40 years of age spread between mother and daughter, our experiences, fears and joys were quite parallel.

It is hard to describe what it's like to see the look on a person who is quadriplegic and has never white water rafted or zip lined come screaming onto shore, to watch an able-bodied person with acrophobia or aqua phobia push above and through their white-knuckled fears or observe a blind person put his trust and footsteps completely in someone else's pathway. How do you explain the feeling of watching a wheel-chair user get pulled and pushed through unforgiving terrain for hours and then watch him go screaming by you down the mountain when a path appears, completely in his element, pedaling like hell with his hands, while you cautiously ride your brakes hard for fear of falling. It is equally as breathtaking to sit next to someone who's never seen the mountains before, watching them process each road bend or inhale the vast backdrop of cascading midnight starlight. Volunteer appreciation took on new definition, their relentless willingness to make everyone's life a little easier and safer. Countless stories continuously unfolded; I was amazed at the living legacies that continually erupted all around me.

A personal highlight for my team came during the closing ceremony. Going into the race our team knew we weren't going to win or come close but figured we could best show up by helping others who struggled along the way. Leverage strengths, pay it forward. A volunteer stood up and told a story about our team, referring to us as the most selfless group of people and helpful team she'd seen. Following the ceremony, one of the coordinating leaders came up to me and said, "During the Prologue Training we had serious reservations if your team, Mastermind Shapeshifters, was going to make it. We thought you'd end up possibly dropping out. When I saw how far you'd progressed coming up the mountain to the top check point yesterday, I couldn't believe you were the same team. Then I got back to camp and heard different volunteers

talking about this one team who kept helping everyone and it was yours. You ended up being my favorite team this year.” I will forever remember the names of these two women, Libby & Helene, for their words of recognition are trophy-engraved in me for life. Note to self and others: There are *many* ways to be a winning team; it starts with kindness.

<http://worldteamsports.org/2011/atc-day2-2011/>

When “Yes I can, Yes we will” cuts across all abilities and erases self-doubt and challenging limitations, the possibilities are amazing. If we hit the wall, we never failed to climb over it. Or extend a hand of ability to create a new possibility for one another. It was such a fresh and addictive experience given the polarization and me-first atmosphere often surrounding us today.

Alyssa told the leaders she’d do it again next year, Mom’s on the fence, thinking more ‘bucket list’ than an annual affair. Life’s short, more to explore. But never say never, especially since we’re being chided to put together an all-female team for next year. Any takers?

It could change someone’s life. Yours. Read about how it changed others:

<http://worldteamsports.org/2011/atc-changes-lives/>

Note: The U.S. Census Bureau Report, March 16, 2001 reported 1 in 5 Americans, (58,731,081) is estimated to have some level of disability. In 2009, the Census Bureau reported 5.5 million veterans with disabilities. The United States Department of Labor stated the unemployment rate for those with disabilities was 16.9 percent, compared with 9.0 percent for persons with no disability.

While this year’s race may be over, the race to help advance the rights and people with disabilities has no finish line in sight. Organizations like No Barriers and Courage Center (and many others) are doing phenomenal good at advancing the rights and resources needed by people with disabilities. Spread the word and encourage others to join the team. www.nobarriersusa.com. Team Mary and Aly will always be available to accept a donation to support people with disabilities.

Our thanks to the Prouty Project www.proutyproject.com for their commitment to push others to STRETCH and believe in the possibilities and abilities of ALL. And for reminding us the Hero’s Journey escapes no one.

Special thanks to my team members: Captain Molly DePrekel, Bill Barkeley, Greg Hayes and Vijay Viswanathan; Alyssa’s team: Captain Mike Felmlee, his daughter Lauren Felmlee, Connor Harthorn and Phil Timmons; our additional 15 Prouty Project team members; 65 national competitors, numerous volunteers and corporate sponsors.

You can watch winning team member Erik Weißenmayer on ABC’s Expedition Impossible this summer; Thursday nights @ 8 Central

Mary Schoessler and Alyssa (Aly) Haefner
July 2011