

RC in New York

Graduates Climb to the Top (of Kilimanjaro)

By Müge Mengü Hale RC 92

Childhood friends, fellow RC graduates and New York professionals Selin Akatlı RC 04, Şirin Neyzi RC 03 and Ayşe Sabuncu RC 04 feel very lucky for what life has offered them, and to show their gratitude, they undertook an incredible challenge to help underprivileged Turkish youth.

Having joined many organized sports activities in New York for charity, it was Selin who came up with the idea: Why not attempt to climb Mount Kilimanjaro and dedicate this activity to supporting Turkish youth?

"None of us are professional athletes or mountain climbers, but we thought this climb would be a once in a lifetime experience for us and also a great opportunity to combine fundraising with a sports activity." says Şirin.

With like-minded Turkish friends around the globe, they formed an 8-person team in December 2010 and immediately started organizing the climb. They called their team Hakuna Matata, which means "no worries" in Swahili. This August, the Hakuna Matata team climbed up Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the highest mountain in Africa, in 7 days and in doing so they managed to raise 35,000 TL through Adım Adım Organization for the "Gençlere Değer" project of Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı (TOG) in Turkey.

They say their Robert College background made it easier for them to undertake this challenge. "In Robert College, we learn to set goals and work towards achieving them at an early age. It was only natural that we undertook this challenge, and we are so happy that we dedicated our climb to a cause that we all personally care about," says Ayşe.

The team is a pioneer in Turkey, where the concept of young people setting out to accomplish such a challenging goal for charity is new. "As a young amateur





Selin Akatlı RC 04 and Ayşe Sabuncu RC 04 group of women, this was a great experience to say, yes, we were able to do it!" says Selin. Moreover, the team had no sponsors. In order to raise funds, they used mostly personal contacts and social media to spread the word. Their effort was hailed by Yonca Tokbaş of Hürriyet, among others, and the group raised their targeted amount of money before the trip.

Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa is a more welcoming challenge and less dangerous for amateur hikers since it is not considered a technical climb.

Before the trip, the team prepped to handle the conditions of high altitude, and they continued to exercise to stay fit to confront the 7-day struggle ahead. Every day they dealt with cold, sunburn, and nausea from the high altitude mountain conditions but they never lost their spirit. It was friendship, perseverance, resilience and optimism that kept them going. "The last 6 hours were the most difficult" says Ayşe. The team left their last camp in the middle of the night to climb to the summit at 5,985 meters. Walking in endless layers of clothes in the chilling and oxygen-less cold, there was a moment they could not sing—or speak—any more, but were left with their own thoughts. At this point,



they were flabbergasted by the beauty of nature. Kilimanjaro's famous glaciers have significantly melted, but it was an amazing experience to be guided to the top with millions of stars in the sky. "We were lightheaded, shivering, had headaches and nausea, any of us could have fallen at any moment," says Ayşe. "There were times I thought I can't walk any further. It becomes a struggle with your own ego," says Selin. Step by step they continued their climb, reminding themselves of their cause, that many young people are struggling to meet a different kind of challenge. After a while, the sky broke and a new dawn brought them to the top. The team was in tears with happiness and joy, experiencing the biggest emotional and physical relief of their lives. "It was our cause, and our trust in each other that made us climb to the top," they say.

Hakuna Matata hiked for Adım Adım/Step by Step through the support of Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı (TOG)'s Gençlere Değer (Valuing Young People) initiative. Adım Adım is a young organization, founded by college students and young professionals dedicated to empowering Turkish youth. TOG was founded by another concerned RC graduate, İbrahim Betil RA 64.

"What attracted us the most to this organization is the need to raise awareness and funds for students who were not as lucky as the eight of us.

The funds will assist young adults with financial aid and will enable them to be active outside of the classroom through extracurricular activities," the team says. "Through this cause, we hope to help cultivate young people who have a better understanding of what being a citizen of the world means, which we have learned to appreciate during our time living outside of Turkey."

Read more about Adım Adım at www.adimadim.org

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