

CLIMB

OF THEIR LIVES



PHOTO BY THOMAS GORMAN



SARAH SWAIM

WRITTEN BY ALISON JOHNSON



Near the summit of Russia's highest mountain, a glacier-covered peak where the weather can turn from sun to hail in just a few hours, a team of exhausted climbers kept repeating five names one September morning: Austin, Emily, Justin, Sarah, Teddy. All five had a type of childhood cancer; one, Teddy Gerber of Connecticut, had died at age 9. The climb up Mount Elbrus was in honor of all of them, as a fundraiser for the St. Baldrick's Foundation, a charity that funds pediatric cancer research.

"Sarah" is Sarah Swaim of Virginia Beach, and she'd sent the climbers a keepsake to carry in their packs for inspiration: a stuffed panda she got just before a

life-saving stem cell transplant. Now 23, Swaim has endured two bouts with biphenotypic leukemia and credits a new type of chemotherapy, developed partially with support from St. Baldrick's, with giving her a chance to survive the transplant.

The Elbrus trip was the third expedition in a program called Climb for Five, which aims to raise awareness that one in five children diagnosed with cancer in the United States don't survive. Climbers tackled Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro in 2010, Washington State's Mount Rainier in 2011 and reached the top of the 18,510-foot Elbrus on Sept. 2. Future climbs may include adult survivors of childhood cancers.

Swaim, a junior at East Carolina University, was one

of five Ambassador Kids selected nationwide for 2012. "St. Baldrick's basically saved my life," she says. "It is searching for treatments that are less harsh on the body, and that's why I had some strength left going into the transplant. It took small things – individual people donating to St. Baldrick's—to fund that research. People think they don't have an impact, but obviously they do."

The team of six climbers and two guides reflected on the Ambassador Kids throughout the 10-day journey up Elbrus, says Patrick McCarrick, founder of Climb

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PATRICK MCCARRICK



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