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Stoddard's Healy rose 29,035 feet at 65[Print Page](#)

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The day Donall B. Healy reached the summit of Mount Everest, he had climbed 11 straight hours.

Most of it was in a blinding snowstorm.

Wrapped in a puffy orange climbing suit, his face covered by an oxygen mask and large, dark glasses to cut the glare, Healy perched to rest near a pole draped with colorful prayer flags.

He felt numb.

The 29,035-foot elevation at the top made each step feel like a monumental task, and even hooked to an oxygen tank, his senses were dulled in the thin air.

A teammate grabbed his camera and snapped a few shots of the 65-year-old mountaineer, who lives in New York City and Stoddard, before a guide insisted the group head down to avoid worsening weather.

The nearest camp was a four-hour slog down the mountain, and as the group of six climbers, their guides and sherpas descended, the weather broke.

Although the 10 minutes or so he spent at the top that day in May was a blur, the story of his arrival there had been a winding road that started long before he'd set off for Kathmandu, Nepal, with his wife, Joyce, in March.

Making a change to his way of life

"I never exercised in my life until I was 61, never played sports," he said in an interview at his Stoddard home this week. "I was becoming a couch potato about 30 pounds heavier than I am now."



Donall Healy of Stoddard shows off some of the climbing gear he used to scale Mount Everest.

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DONALL HEALY FAST FACTS

Dressed in a long-sleeved climbing shirt and khaki pants, Healy now carries himself with the ease of a lifelong athlete. His frame is lean and compact.

It was during the summer of 2006 that Healy began what would become a four-year roller coaster to the top of Everest.

An employee at the sign manufacturing company he runs in New York was spending the week helping Healy on the large expanse of property surrounding his home in Stoddard.

After several hours of cutting and hauling brush the first day, the younger man, a boxer who regularly exercised, convinced Healy to join him for a workout.

"He really sort of shamed me, cajoled me," Healy said. "My wife had been trying to get me to do it, my doctor had been trying to get me to exercise and I kept saying, 'Ah, mañana, mañana.'"

At the time, Healy didn't even own athletic shoes, so the two stocked up on exercise essentials in Keene and worked out together every day that week.

Healy stuck with the plan, building his fitness level through the summer. When he was in New York, Healy went during lunchtime to a makeshift gym assembled by shop workers at his company and worked out with them.

And as he grew fitter and eased toward retirement, a childhood dream of climbing Mount Everest crept to the front of Healy's mind.

Aside from climbing Mount Marcy in New York as a child at summer camp and a trek in the South Asian countries of Bhutan and Nepal during a vacation with his family, Healy didn't know the first thing about mountaineering.

But he dived in, studying and buying the gear he'd need and developing a training schedule that would get him on Mount Everest by the time he was 65.

"When I first started researching this I created a calendar of climbs to put me on Everest," he said.

The first was a three-day hike up Mount Washington in early 2007, followed by a six-day course on Mount Baker in Washington's Cascade Range. Next, he signed up for a

Name: Donall B. Healy

Age: 65.

Occupation: Founder and chairman of the New York-based sign company, Visual Graphic Systems Inc., since 1981.

Hometown: Garden City, N.Y.

Residence: New York City and Stoddard.

Family: Wife, Joyce; son, Brian, 30; and daughter Mary Caitlin, 24.

Education: Bachelor of Arts in economics from the University of Toronto; Master's in Business Administration from Harvard University.

Hobbies: Mountaineering, travel, working on his property in Stoddard.

Question:

You mentioned that climbing Mount Everest was a lifelong dream. What spurred that dream?

Answer: "When I was 10 years old, the first hardback book I ever read was 'The Conquest of Everest.' It had just come out and sort of chronicled the ascent of Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. I don't know what prompted me to read it, but it was in our house, it was a book-of-the-month club selection. So anyway, I guess the photographs attracted my attention and I started reading it. I loved it."

Question:

summer climb of Mount Rainier in Washington.

But it was a climb he wouldn't make.

Five days before the scheduled expedition, he crash his bike during a tour with Joyce through the White Mountains.

Lying in a small hospital in North Conway, he learned he fractured his left hip in the fall.

"I was shocked to hear that it was fractured," he said. "I thought it was just some torn muscles."

A surgeon at the hospital placed a pin in his hip, but after 11 weeks on crutches it wasn't healing properly.

In October 2007, Healy had full hip replacement.

The procedure involves placing a titanium stem in the femur, which is attached to a ceramic ball. It fits into a plastic-lined titanium socket implanted in his pelvis.

Not giving up on the dream

It might have been easy to table the Everest training as he recovered, but Healy wasn't ready to let his dream slip away.

"I climbed a small peak in St. Lucia 90 days after the replacement," he said. "I was religious about physical therapy and I'd kept my upper body strength up."

By March, he'd scaled Mount Adams in Washington, but he marked his recovery from when he conquered Mount Rainier that summer.

"I noticed on both Adams and Rainier that if I had to leap across a stream I was always favoring my right leg, I just didn't trust my left one," he said. "But I basically overcame that on Rainier."

Later that year, he climbed mountains in Ecuador and in 2009 took on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and Denali — formerly Mount McKinley — in Alaska.

By then, he'd climbed the highest mountains on two continents, but Everest still loomed in the distance.

Healy dubbed his mission "Everest Hip Hop" and decided to use his trip to raise money and awareness for the Nepal-based Hospital and Rehabilitation Center for Disabled Children.

The organization provides orthopedic operations and prostheses to children.

His goal is to raise \$29,035, the height of Everest, of which he's raised about \$21,000.

In late March, Healy set off for Nepal. His wife joined him on the 11-day trek to Everest base camp.

Healy joined a group of eight other mountaineers for more than a month of training on Everest leading up to the climb on the southeast ridge of the mountain.

He knew one of the climbers, a 20-something named Vanessa Folkerts, from his expedition on Denali.

The two had discovered they had a Monadnock Region connection when Folkerts, a violinist who was a student at Princeton University, mentioned she'd been to a summer music camp at Sullivan-based

How was the view at the summit?

Answer: "We went up in a blinding snowstorm. We had waited days at Camp 2 for perfect weather at the summit, finally made our push, and stayed overnight at Camp 4. The day we spent there (at Camp 4) was quite nice and we're in our tents at 5:30 (p.m.) trying to sleep, getting ready for the summit push, which was to begin at 9:30, and this storm rolled in. It was blasting snow. The snow was horizontal for eight hours. It was 20- to 30-mile-an-hour winds and the only good news was that the temperature wasn't so bad. If it had been colder the windchill would have knocked us out probably."

Apple Hill Center for Chamber Music.

Healy serves on the organization's board of directors.

He met another member of the Everest team, D. Christian McDonald, on the flight to Nepal.

McDonald, who is from Illinois, said he instantly took to Healy and the two became fast friends.

"Don was always just really good-humored, good-natured," he said. "A well-spoken gentleman."

The two men also shared a common bond — McDonald, then 37, had suffered a spinal injury before the climb and was impressed by Healy's determination following his hip injury.

Alison Levine, a California climber in their party, agrees.

"I would describe him as very determined and someone who would persevere through whatever conditions the mountain threw at him," Levine wrote in an e-mail. "I will also say that he is one of the most considerate and polite people I've ever had the privilege of climbing with."

The team spent five grueling weeks climbing to increasingly higher elevations to acclimate to the altitude.

Shortly before the "final assault" on the summit, as it's called in mountaineering circles, the group split up for a rest period.

Most of the team dropped back to an elevation of about 12,000 feet for a few days.

Healy took a helicopter ride to Kathmandu, accompanying McDonald — who had broken some ribs during a training climb on the dangerous Lhotse Face section of the mountain — and another injured climber.

The party regrouped and left May 17 from base camp — elevation 17,700 feet — for the final assault.

Healy was ill and worried he wouldn't make it up the mountain, but woke up the next morning feeling better.

It was also his 65th birthday.

He'd reached one goal, but still faced six days of climbing to the summit.

As the team worked its way up the mountain past some of the most famous, and treacherous, marks — the Khumbu Icefall, the Lhotse Face — Healy remained focused on the top.

On May 23 the group spent the day resting at Camp 4, the last stop before the summit.

The weather, initially forecast to be clear, had turned and a snowstorm now raged.

The group members stuck to their 9:30 p.m. departure time. On the way up, they passed a handful of teams that turned back because of the storm.

Healy reached the top about 8:30 a.m. the next day, shortly after most of the team.

Six of the original nine-person team had made it.

Three of the climbers, including McDonald, whose broken ribs made breathing at the higher altitudes excruciating, had dropped out early.

Healy believes he is the first person with a complete hip replacement to conquer Everest.

A new challenge ahead; a new mantra

Since his return, Healy has taken some time off from the strict 12- to 14-hour-a-week training regimen he kept in the months before the climb.

He stays fit and is eyeing a possible attempt at the Seven Summits — the highest peak on each of the continents — but doesn't have any immediate climbing plans.

Instead, he's sharing his climbing story and getting the word out about his continued fundraising for the orthopedic organization in Nepal.

In June, he appeared on NBC's "Today" show and has given a handful of lectures about his trip.

This fall, he plans to give presentations in the Monadnock Region.

And "Replace Limits" — the mantra he repeated to himself throughout training — has now become "Limits Replaced."

u Healy's upcoming presentations about his climb include: Sept. 17 at 7:30 p.m. at Stoddard Town Hall; Oct. 7 at 7 p.m. at the Harris Center for Conservation Education in Hancock and Nov. 19 at 7 p.m. at the Mariposa Museum in Peterborough. For more information, visit www.everesthiphop.com.

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