

Climbing for a cause: Mountaineer set for quest to climb six of the world's tallest mountains



Nick Cienski, a Baltimore resident who works for Under Armour, will attempt to climb six of the world's highest mountains this year to raise funds and awareness to combat human trafficking. On a previous climb, he tackles Manaslu, the eighth highest mountain in the world, in Nepal. (Courtesy Nick Cienski)

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It wasn't enough for Nick Cienski to climb 29,000 feet to the top of Mount Everest. The adventurer decided to attack the world's highest mountain from an unconventional route, traversing a very sharp and highly dangerous western ridge. "Your exposure is massive," Cienski remembered. "You have thousands of feet of nothing below you."

While Cienski successfully completed his expedition, others did not. Five people died.

"Every one of them was a way better climber than I was," Cienski remembered, "yet, I was one of the guys who survived. Why me?"

After 26 years of soul searching, the 48-year-old senior director of innovation at Baltimore-based Under Armour believes he has found his answer.

In March, the mountaineer will begin a yearlong mission to climb six of the world's highest mountains. The "Six Summits Challenge" will raise awareness about human trafficking, along with funds to combat the second-largest criminal enterprise in the world. It is being organized by Mission 14, a nonprofit organization founded by Cienski to help victims of sex slavery.

Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services, which offers outreach services in 93 countries, is among the partner organizations that will benefit from the challenge.

Ciensi became interested in issues related to trafficking five years ago after he and his wife, Sandi, went on a mission trip to Nicaragua with their church, Grace City Church in Baltimore.

"We came in contact with these people living in a garbage dump who were horribly poor," said Ciensi, a son of Polish parents who has lived in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Canada, and has climbed mountains across the globe.

"Some of them did, in fact, sell their children," he said. "It was the hardest thing I've ever run into in life."

Making ascents of tens of thousands of feet will be highly grueling.

"Your body tends to deteriorate very quickly," he said. "You lose weight and muscle mass. You don't sleep. Your stress and anxiety levels tend to be high, yet your output has to be at an Olympian level."

Because the body can't digest proteins at high altitudes, climbers are only able to ingest 1,200 calories a day, Ciensi said, even though they will burn 10,000.

Ciensi's wife will accompany him on the trip. She won't make the climbs, but will be taking photographs and chronicling her husband's adventure on social media. The lean, graying climber hopes people will donate a penny a foot in support of the 70,000-foot challenge.

"In addition to prayer and relying on God to get me up and down these things, knowing that people are putting their penny on every step is a huge driver not to give up," he said.

The mountaineer said he has received support from his employers at Under Armour and will wear gear especially designed by his company for the expedition.

"We're taking this opportunity to set some new boundaries on what's possible from a gear perspective," he said.

If Ciensi completes the challenge, he will break the current mountain-climbing record of five summits of the world's highest mountains in a year.

"We hope that the collaboration with Mission 14 on this exciting project will generate much-needed international awareness about this issue," said Carolyn Woo, president and CEO of CRS.



Making ascents of tens of thousands of feet will be highly grueling, says Nick Cienski. (Karen Osborne | CR Staff)

Cienski, who said he is ready for the quest, called the entire project “an amazing faith journey.”

“It’s been constant prayer,” he said. “We asked God to show us everything we need to do and it’s all come together.”

For more information, visit www.mission14.org

The mountains Nick Cienski will climb during the Six Summits Challenge:

- Everest, Nepal (29,000 feet)
- L’Hotse, Nepal (27,900 feet)
- Makalu, Nepal (27,700 feet)
- Cho Oyu, Tibet (26,900 feet)
- Shisha Pangma, Tibet (26,300 feet)
- Manaslu, Nepal (26,700 feet)

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