

Climbing for Confidence

Completing a challenging adventure put the difficulties of daily living into perspective for six blind children in Tibet.

BY ERIK WEIHENMAYER



Erik Weihenmayer and Sabriye Tenberken are two of the most remarkable people I have ever known. I met Erik through climbing. We have scaled rock faces, skied double black diamond slopes, and ascended some of America's most difficult frozen waterfalls together. I first met Sabriye in Tibet when I was teaching local doctors how to perform cataract surgery. A few years later, I was walking in an airport when a person behind me asked if I were Geoff Tabin. I had not said a word. She recognized me by the sound and cadence of my walk!

Both Erik and Sabriye are blind, with no light perception in either eye. The following story, written by Erik, puts into perspective any difficulties we think we have. To learn more about his adventures in Tibet, look for the amazing, award-winning documentary film, "Blindsight" which is currently playing in theaters across the US.

—Geoffrey Tabin, MD, Section Editor

Like me, Sabriye Tenberken had been blinded at age 12 by a degenerative retinal disease, but that tragedy did not kill her vision. Instead of merely coping with adversity, she stepped out to make a positive difference, first by applying to a government-funded program to help underprivileged people in other parts of the world. When the German government cited her disability as making it impossible for her to assist others and denied Sabriye's application, she remained undaunted. She simply refocused her interest on Tibet.

BRILLE FOR THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE

While working on a master's degree in Tibetology, Sabriye discovered that there was no Braille alphabet for the 42 characters that compose the complex Asian language. She developed one from scratch in just 2 weeks. As she explained to me, "It was a matter of necessity. I had picked Tibet as the country where I later wanted to do development work. Because a Braille system didn't exist, I had no choice but to create one."

Bigger challenges were yet to come.

UNDERSTANDING BLINDNESS IN TIBET

Although Tibet is widely regarded as a mountain paradise, the per capita rate of blindness among its inhabitants (one in 70) is twice that of the global average.

Several factors contribute to the high rate of visual disability among Tibetans, including their exposure to high altitude, intense sunlight, and the constant soot from the yak dung they use to build fires. Unfortunately, Tibetan culture stigmatizes blindness and labels affected children as cursed with demons. Families believe that having a blind child is a punishment for a misdeed committed by an ancestor or in a previous life.

In 1997, Sabriye scraped together her scarce resources and entered Tibet armed only with her cane. Accompanied by a Tibetan health counselor, she courageously traveled the mountainous countryside on horseback to learn the plight of the blind there. Despite her good intentions, she received a cold reception. "It was depressing," she told me. "We met kids who had been tied to beds for years so they would not hurt themselves. Some could not walk because their parents had not given them the space to develop." I was deeply affected by her stories.

INTO THE BREACH

Despite many bureaucratic and cultural obstacles, in May 1998, Sabriye opened Braille Without Borders, the first training center for blind and visually impaired children in Lhasa, Tibet. She started with three students and faced huge prejudice and bureaucracy. She taught her students to navigate the chaotic city of Lhasa independently with

only their canes (Figure 1). When the students met with ridicule in the streets, Sabriye showed them how to fight back with their words and, most importantly, never to be ashamed of their blindness. Ten years later, her respected center trains more than 100 students every year.

SEEKING NEW CHALLENGES

A year after I climbed Mt. Everest, I received a life-changing letter from Sabriye. It began as follows.

Dear Erik,

After you have reached the top of the world, our Tibetan neighbor rushed into our center and told the kids about your success. Some of them first did not believe it but then there was a mutual understanding: if you could climb to the top of the world, we also can overcome our borders and show to the world that the blind can equally participate in society and are able to accomplish great things... The children realized that it does not matter much if you are a blind child in Germany, USA, or Tibet, the experience one has who becomes blind, the embarrassment at first, the confidence which builds up slowly but steadily, the reaction of the sighted surrounding is probably for every blind person the same.

Sabriye invited me to visit her school in Lhasa, but I thought I could do more (Figure 2). Why not take the students on an Everest-sized adventure unlike anything they had ever experienced? I wanted them to know they were special, to make them feel like they were a part of something big. I hoped that this “bigness” would become ingrained in the students and affect their lives.

I told Sabriye to pick the six students she thought would be best suited to the challenge I was planning, and, along with some friends I knew from climbing Mt. Everest, I boarded a plane to Lhasa. During our first visit, we took the children on a training trek. With lots of coaching, the students completed an arduous ascent up and over a 17,500-foot mountain pass. Although the children struggled, and some of them got sick, their will was steadfast. As the challenge intensified, the students’ skills evolved quickly.



(Courtesy of Blindsight/Spark Entertainment)

Figure 1. Sabriye Tenberken walks through Lhasa, Tibet, with Kyila, one of the students who climbed the East Rombuk Glacier with the author.

CLIMBING THE GLACIER

The region around Mt. Everest has such deep spiritual, symbolic, and mythical importance in the Tibetan culture that I thought it would be immeasurably powerful to bring the children to this area. Several months after our initial training trek, my colleagues and I returned to Tibet to lead the six blind students to a peak on the East Rombuk Glacier, a huge glacial formation on the side of Mt. Everest, just above the 21,000-foot camp.

Along the way, we confronted rocky trails and brutally cold temperatures. We even had to traverse a zigzagging pathway through a miniature ice fall that was riddled with serpentine columns, jutting pinnacles, and shifting shards of ice. The students had never experienced anything like it before. One boy fell into a crevasse, but we were able to haul him out immediately by the ropes that



(Courtesy of Blindsight/Spark Entertainment.)

Figure 2. Erik Weihenmayer jokes with some of the blind students who successfully climbed East Rombuk Glacier in Tibet.

bound us together. Although challenging, the trip was also incredibly tactile and filled the children with wonder as they played in the magical palace of ice.

REACHING THE PEAK

The entire climb took almost a month. Many children got sick, and all of them struggled. Ultimately, however, these blind Tibetan students who had been hit with rocks, sold into slavery, and tied to beds in dark rooms, all stood on the glacier at 21,500 feet.

Our arrival at the summit was not marked by a dramatic celebration. Many of the children seemed ambivalent about, even stunned by, our achievement. As we made our descent, I wondered if I had put the students through unnecessary suffering. My misgivings were allayed on my last day in Tibet, when they gathered around me. Kyila, the best at English of the group, asked, "Will you come back to take us to the top of Mt. Everest?"

"I thought you did not like climbing?" I said playfully.

"We love climbing," they all yelled incredulously.

"You cannot climb mountains," I teased. "You are blind."

"We can do anything," Sonam Bonsu shot back and punched me in the arm.

"We want to climb higher," Kyila said.

ENDURING CONFIDENCE

Since the blind climbers descended from the East Rombuk Glacier, their aspirations have grown. Kyila spent a year studying in the United Kingdom and returned to Tibet to run Braille Without Borders. Gyenshen started the first Braille printing business in Tibet. Sonam Bonsu graduated first in her class from a mainstream school. Two more of the students run the biggest massage therapy clinic in Lhasa.

Sabriye Tenberken and her young students have turned the perception of blindness around in Tibet. They have gone far beyond surviving the challenges of their daily lives. The blindness that made these students the scourge of society now gives them strength and propels them forward with determination and joy. ■

To learn more about Sabriye Tenberken's training center in Lhasa, visit <http://www.braillewithoutborders.org>.

Erik Weihenmayer is the only blind person in history to climb Everest and the Seven Summits. This article is adapted from The Adversity Advantage (available at <http://www.adversityadvantage.com/>), a book he co-authored with Paul G. Stoltz.