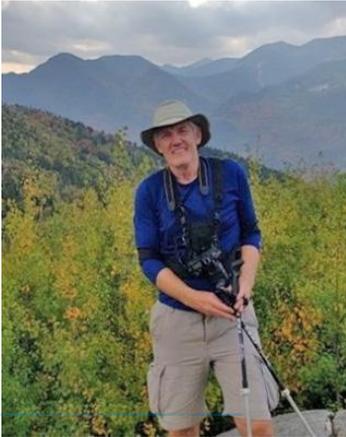


KILIMANJARO OR BUST!

By Sean Skehan (sskeha54@gmail.com)



It all began nearly 2 years ago (September 2023) while trekking in Peru with my good friend, Dave Schuman, a former member of the CH2M team in Deerfield Beach. Yes, this is something we do to have fun. There we were, at the bottom of beautiful Colca Canyon (second deepest canyon on the planet), exhausted from a steep descent and climb back up, at an elevation of approximately (elev. ~) 8,000 feet. As we enjoyed a beer and quinoa stew, we start talking about future trips to consider. It was there that Kilimanjaro was tossed on the table. Mind you, Dave and I both live in Florida near sea level.

Since I was a kid and on into my later years, I've been camping, hiking, and climbing in the hills and mountains of upstate New York, Virginia, and California. Although the Adirondacks are easily accessible and not the highest of mountains, they're considered some of the most rugged in the country.



It was here, after completing the 46 Adirondack High Peaks (September 2019), that I started thinking about doing other challenging and more "notable" climbs that had been on my bucket list. Unfortunately, Covid came along (around January 2020) and sidelined plans for several trips. With the fading of Covid in my area about April 2023, a plan quickly took shape for Peru (September 2023) and doing an Incan trail trek with Dave and one of my intrepid daughters.

After completing our Peru treks, Dave and I started to get serious about Kilimanjaro, the tallest mountain (elev. 19,334 ft) on the African continent. In January 2024, we signed on and made a deposit with Habari Adventures for the trek/climb. According to the online description, the climb is non-technical but would be very difficult, dangerous, painful, and cost a few bucks. Also, we might suffer altitude sickness and might not even reach the summit.

Even with the challenges, the trip would help to get us fit, we'd experience four seasons in a week, we'd have fantastic photo opportunities, we'd become friends with the crew and other people in a completely different part of the world, we'd see exotic fauna and flora, we'd experience an elevated (so to speak) sense of achievement, and we'd see stars more brightly than ever before. Yeah, we were hooked. I should mention at this point that a mutual friend and client, Keith, jumped into our adventure as well.

And so it began. Given the challenges and what we had read, we knew we needed to put in the time to get ready. We spent a good deal of time in the gym, primarily on the treadmill maxed out at 15%, and with trainers to help focus our workouts toward climbing the mountain. I also took near-daily trips to the beach, walking and slow-jogging in the soft sand. I live a few blocks from the beach in Daytona and Dave, who lives in south Florida, made long walks part of his regular routine. Keith put in many arduous hours hiking in local sandy parks.



Here we were, three flatlanders with about 7 or 8 months to get ready for the adventure of a lifetime that would take us (hopefully) to the top of the highest mountain in Africa.

I've been retired for 11 years, but Dave and Keith are still working. Regardless, they were able to get in a couple of "Colorado Teeners"—peaks in the state that are above 13,000 feet—to test the legs and lungs. I road-tripped to Virginia to see Steve Lavinder (formerly CH2M HILL and Jacobs, ATL) and knocked out a few short, steep climbs, known as "scrambles," to test the legs. It should be

noted that Steve is nothing short of a mountain goat, and keeping up with him was and is a challenge!

Our trek was for 8 days: 7 days to the summit and a final day to come back down and exit the park. Kilimanjaro is in Tanzania on the east coast of Africa. There are multiple routes to climb the mountain, and we decided on the relatively long Lemosho route (approximately 42 miles), giving us more time to acclimate to the elevation and a better chance to reach the summit.



Part of the daily routine was to “climb high and sleep low,” which is a strategy for becoming acclimated to the high elevations. So, at the end of a day’s climb, we’d come back down part-way for sleep. The route had us climbing through four different ecological zones: the rain forest, the moorland, the Alpine desert, and finally the Arctic zone, our ultimate destination.

I left on August 20 (Orlando/Boston/Amsterdam/Arusha) and landed early evening on the 21st, cleared customs, and got my visa. Another traveler named Niri and I were met by the Habari driver, who took us to our modest hotel in Moshi, our meeting point for the trek. En route, Niri and I talked and compared notes. He was to meet his group in 2 days; they were also climbing Kilimanjaro on the Lemosho route. I had flown Delta/KLM and had upgraded seating that turned out to be fantastic for my 6’3” frame. As a result, I was well-rested after the 22-hour flight.

Niri and I met the next morning over breakfast and decided to see what local sites we could take in that day. The front desk arranged for transportation in a tuk tuk, a three-wheeled cart suitable for carrying two to three people. We made our way into town and hit the bank to exchange our dollars for Tanzanian shillings (\$1.00 = 3,600 TZS). Yes, the exchange rate was crazy favorable, and things were very affordable. Our driver plus our local guide for the day cost (combined) only about \$15.

Our next stop was a coffee shop to plot our day’s activities with the driver, who spoke English reasonably well. To our delight, the coffee at the shop was spectacular! We were then off to walk the Rau Forest Reserve hoping to see monkeys and birds, rice paddies, and ultimately a sacred 200-year-old Muvule tree (related to teak) at 165 feet tall.



We returned in the late afternoon on dirt roads passing people carrying large bundles on their heads; big bunches of bananas were quite common. Smiling children were everywhere on their way home from school.

As we passed through town, we saw a wide variety of roadside stands, with people selling clothing, car parts, fruits and vegetables, and pretty much anything you could think of. Back at the hotel, it was time for a quick dip in the pool and another Kilimanjaro beer before the buffet dinner.





Niri's group headed out the first thing next morning, leaving us to meet with our guides, Moody and Abdi. We needed to get a detailed run-down on the trek and have our gear inspected to make sure we were bringing the essentials to reach the summit, known as Uhuru Peak. ("Uhuru" in Swahili means "Freedom," and I hope you all remember Uhuru was also the name of the curvaceous Starfleet communications officer on the early Star Trek!)

We then spent the afternoon in Moshi visiting small shops, changing money, drinking coffee, and relaxing. That evening, we had a great meal away from the hotel and got back early to make final tune-ups to our bag weights. We needed to make sure none of our bags, which would be carried by our team of porters, exceeded the 30-pound limit. Each of us had our own small, separate backpack to carry our daily needs gear. We had a total of 12 porters, a tent for each of us, a cook tent, a mess tent, and perhaps most important, a portable toilet. In addition to Moody and Abdi, we had a cook and an attendant named Michael.

Day 1: On the Trail in the Jungle

Early on the morning of the 25th we got our bags to the bus and our remaining items logged into the hotel for storage. At the Habari office, we learned that we would have another traveler joining our group, a woman named Sarita from England. It was about a 3-hour drive to the park entrance, where we would pick up the Lemosho trail at elev. ~7,100 feet. Once we reached the park entrance, it took us approximately an hour and a half to get registered due to the number of people entering the park and the resulting congestion. It was about mid-day when we were finally off, walking on a well-worn trail up through a lush jungle landscape under a canopy of beautiful trees. Our goal was camp Mti Mkubwa, which was approximately 4.5 miles away and considered mountain forest.

Along the way, we paused several times to get our legs and lungs accustomed to climbing at elevation and to enjoy the various groups of monkeys that we saw: blue and black-and-white colobus. It was late afternoon when we finally arrived at camp (elev. 8,745 feet), the tents already set up. The camp was abuzz with other groups, all intent on climbing the mountain. We were offered warm water to wash our faces and hands before dinner—there would be no showers for the next 7 days, and water had to be conserved due to the limited supply on the trail.

We gathered at the mess tent for a pre-dinner snack and cups of tea while we were briefed by our guides, telling us about what to expect tomorrow and inquiring about how we felt. Each day began and ended with a precautionary health questionnaire: headaches, nausea, general physical condition, and blood oxygen measurements. Everyone felt good after the first day.

We enjoyed a simple dinner of rice and vegetable stew followed by fresh fruit and tea. It wasn't long after dinner that we headed for our tents. The sounds of the forest at twilight, the birds, insects, and howling monkeys, were welcome melodies as we crawled into our sleeping bags looking forward to a good night's sleep.

Day 2: "Po le, Po le"/Mountain Siting

Day 2 arrived all too soon, and 5:30 was an early start. Michael had made sure we had warm water at the door to the mess tent for a morning wash. As we crawled out of our tents, it was clear that monkeys and ringneck ravens had made the camp their own at this early hour. We all met at the mess tent at 6:00, had our breakfast of eggs, rice, and fruit served with tea or coffee, followed by our physical evaluation.

By 7:30, we were on the trail, with a goal of Shira 1 Camp, about 5 miles away at elev. ~12,000 feet. Our progress was slow and steady. We had already learned the most important Swahili term of the trip, "po-le, po-le," meaning "slowly, slowly." All the porters who passed us gave us friendly reminders by repeating it. Without the porters, our trek would have been impossible. They always had a welcoming smile while carrying 60 pounds of gear on their backs or balanced on top of their heads. By contrast, we were carrying 10 to 15 pounds max.

The trail slowly transitioned away from the forest into the moorland zone, where the vegetation is more shrublike and is adapted to the drier, higher elevations. Heather and unique flowering plants became much more prevalent. The trail also became much drier, dusty, and strewn with rocks and small boulders, slowing our progress considerably.



Midway through the day we arrived at our lunch spot, where we were served burgers, fries, and coleslaw that were hungrily devoured. An hour and a half later we were back on the trail and moving much more

slowly with our full bellies. I was careful to eat less at midday after that. We finally made it to Shira 1 Camp later in the afternoon, rested for an hour, and met for a dinner of leek/lentil soup, chicken, and cabbage. This camp, at elev. ~11,900 feet, has little to no vegetation and the temperature dropped down to the low 40s that evening.

We were most thankful that we had paid the extra money for the 3-foot-square portable toilet tent. It was certainly not designed for larger bodies and was not handicap-accessible.

Nonetheless, given our change of diet and all the walking, it was a most welcome extra. The outhouses at the camps were inhospitable and in terrible condition; in short, as W.C. Fields would say, “not a fit place for man nor beast.” I’ll leave it at that.

At this point we’d only had occasional glimpses of the mountain through the cloud cover. However, late that afternoon a front moved through, the sky cleared, and the mountain stood before us in all its glory, glacier-capped, with a single thin cloud wrapping around the very peak. “Holy sh**” was muttered a few times as we stood there in the cold asking ourselves if we were of right mind to be climbing this beast. But as darkness approached and the camp slowly grew quiet, the stars came out like some slow-motion avalanche in the sky. Horizon to horizon, nothing but stars and no outside light to contaminate the sky. Truly we were onto something incredible. And so the day ended with a “lala salama,” or “sleep well.” Eventually, the cold and darkness sent us off to our tents and sleeping bags.

Day 3: The Changing Environment



We’re up at 6:00 and are now following a routine: warm water at the mess tent, breakfast (scrambled eggs, pancakes, fruit, tea/coffee), physical evaluation, then pack and hit the trail. So far, we’ve all fared well with the evaluations, only some minor headaches, muscle aches, and a bit of variability in the oxygen readings.

We were on the trail by 7:30 looking forward to 6 miles of an easy grade to Shira 2 Camp. The day started clear and brisk but gradually clouded over. Near mid-day we were greeted with rain, some hail, and flurries. Fortunately, it didn’t last long and served to quiet the clouds of dust from the trail. We were on the trail before all the porters, but soon they were passing us by.



It was amazing to watch how the porters moved on the trail with such ease and speed while carrying their load. They would often meet us with greetings of “jambo sana” (Swahili for “hello very much”), always with big smiles and of course balancing a pack on their backs and heads.

The trail-side featured a wide range of plants that have adapted to the harsh conditions: vivid orange gladiolus, gray giant heather, yellow St. John’s wort, giant tree groundsel (prehistoric in appearance), a variety of grasses, golden lichen growing on the rocks and boulders, and so many more.

The four of us arrive at Shira 2 (elev. ~12,780 feet) late afternoon to a bit of fun. We receive an official welcome by the guides and the whole crew. There’s singing, dancing, and personal introductions of everyone.

Sarita was by far the best dancer, with Keith pulling up second. Definitely a good time for nearly an hour, followed by a dinner of potato soup, pizza, and burritos. We then had our daily briefing from Moody and Abdi.

We’re told that tomorrow will be challenging. It’s 6 miles to our next camp, and we will proceed in 2 stages. Stage 1 will be up about 2,400 feet to Lava Tower (elev. ~15,180 feet), and Stage 2 will take us back down to Barranco Camp (elev. ~13,077 feet). We’ll be taking our time, “po-le, po-le,” and shouldn’t have any serious problems. “Get a good night’s sleep,” we’re told. Soon, we headed toward our tents, only to find the day’s last light reflecting golden across the mountain, framed by dark gray clouds. Beautiful. As the darkness and chill closed in, we were happy to crawl into our sleeping bags.

Day 4: A Tough Day



Morning for us started at 6:00, and we were met with a cold, clear day. We saw a heavy frost and droplets of condensation frozen on the tents. As the sun rose, we had a magnificent view of Mawenzi Peak, the sister to Kilimanjaro. She was bathed in pink light as she pushed through the clouds of the surrounding valley. It was a great image to start the day, just before diving into our breakfast of porridge, eggs, tortillas, coffee, and tea.

By 7:30 we were on the trail and heading for Lava Tower. True to our briefing the night before, it was a tough climb, tough on the legs and breathing for 5 hours, gaining ~2,400 feet in elevation. After arriving at Lava Tower, we sat down to our lunch of veggie stew (potatoes, yams, chickpeas, and carrots). There was time to relax and nap after the meal, but we still had 2 miles of descent to our next camp. The “climb high and sleep low” thing was frustrating, since we had to give back some terrain we had struggled to take. We had made the climb to 15,180 feet and were looking straight up the side of Kilimanjaro—only 4,160 feet to the peak.

It was a steep, rough 2 miles to Barranco Camp, climbing down and over and around large rocks and boulders. Near the camp, the flow from several small glacier melt streams had eroded shallow hollows and ravines. Because of the moisture and added shelter, plant life was abundant: large purple thistles, giant groundsels (over 30 feet high), and giant lobelia, among others.



On one of our brief breaks, sitting beside the trail, I heard a familiar old AC/DC song “Thunderstruck.” A porter then passed by carrying a huge load and a small music box; we gave him a thumbs up and he responded with a toothy smile and “hakuna matata,” Swahili for “there are no troubles,” never missing a step. How about that...two cross-cultural surprises thousands of miles from home: a rock anthem and the bouncy “hakuna matata” from Disney’s “The Lion King.” Too funny!

Barranco Camp (elev. ~13,077 feet) is a bustling camp at the confluence of two trails cutting across the mountain and a single trail leading to the peak. The camp is located at the base of what appeared to be a shear wall, ~800 feet high. We’d arrived with plenty of time to wander around the camp, take in the view, confront the famous Barranco Wall, see the unusual plant life, and search for cell phone signal. Yes, there was signal but very sketchy.

It had been another clear, beautiful day and the sunset was magnificent. At dinner, Moody and Abdi told us that the weather report for the next few days was good and conditions should be perfect for our final climb. For tomorrow, they wanted us up even earlier so we could avoid the bottleneck with other trekkers going up the wall. Once again, we all passed our health/physical evaluation; for flatlanders, we’re doing well with the elevation.

Day 5: The Kissing Wall

We’re up at 5:30, on the trail by 7:15, and at the base of the wall 15 minutes later, well ahead of the other trekkers: mission accomplished. It looks daunting from a distance, but we soon see a trail that winds its way up. It’s a welcome change from our previous day’s relentless labor. We’d already packed our hiking poles and up we go using both hands at times to haul ourselves up.



At one spot, known as the “Kissing Wall,” the trail is less than 12 inches wide. We were told to belly up to the wall and edge our way across for 5 or 6 feet. Halfway across we were supposed to kiss the rock wall for good luck on our climb— much like the Blarney Stone in Ireland. An hour and half after we started, we were on top



and looking back, satisfied that we were well ahead of the stream of other trekkers coming out of the camp. It was another beautiful, clear day, and we arrived at Karanga Camp (elev. 13,235 feet) just before 1 PM.

At lunch we're told that the rest of the day is ours to rest and relax, all part of the acclimation and being physically ready for the next 2 days. The day ends with a clear sky, a spectacular sunset, another passed physical evaluation for each of us, a blanket of stars, and increasing anticipation for the final 2 days.

It's been 8 days since I shaved and 6 days since our last showers. Things are getting a bit rough, to say the least. Wet wipes are a huge plus! And in case you've been wondering, the Gatorade bottles have been an asset beyond words late at night in our tents, given the Diamox diuretic.

Day 6: An Easy Day with Anxious Anticipation

We're up at 6:15, pack our personal gear, meet in the mess tent, eat, and have our



physical evaluation. Remarkably, we're without any symptoms of mountain sickness and we're good to go. We're then on the trail by 8:45 and climbing. We have less than 2 miles to Barafu Camp but have a ~2,065-foot gain in elevation. Plant-wise, we've transitioned from the moorland zone into the Alpine desert zone.

It's a moonscape of volcanic rock, all shapes and sizes from gravel to boulders. Random shards of obsidian (a glass formed in certain volcanic eruptions) lay scattered, reflecting in the sunlight.

Breathing is becoming more challenging, "po-le, po-le." It's another blue-sky day, and all we see in front of us is the mountain urging us on. Looking back, we see the dust rising in the sunlight from all the porters and trekkers making their way along the trail. Our guides have done well having us up and out of camp early each day to avoid the crowded trail. We estimate there are 200 to 250 people, including those amazing porters. The average ratio is 2 to 3 porters per trekker, depending on the group size.



Our day ends early after 3 hours of climbing. We reach Barafu Camp (elev. ~15,295 feet) and after lunch we're told to rest and sleep if we can until dinner and then eat and rest again. At dinner, Moody and Abdi tell us to be up at 11:00 PM and ready to go shortly thereafter for our push to the summit. We will have clear skies, but it will be cold and windy, probably in the mid-teens; our uninsulated water bottles will freeze quickly. It will be strenuous and tough, and we'll be on the trail for about 7 hours, going "po-le, po-le." Our goal is to reach the summit at sunrise, leaving plenty of time to return to camp at a much lower elevation.

It's less than 2.5 miles, but with an elevation gain of ~4,146 feet. Imagine climbing a steep staircase for 7 hours, with 50 percent less atmospheric pressure than at sea level, and that much less oxygen available. A warning sign reminds us of various precautions. We'll take periodic rest stops, and we need to be mindful of any excessive headaches, nausea, drowsiness, unusual difficulty breathing, and even hallucinations. An extra head lamp would be advisable, or at least extra batteries.



We're up and out of our tents at 11 PM. I'm layered up with thermal long johns (upper and lower), insulated pants, and a Gortex shell. Up top, I also have a heavy fleece, a down jacket, and another Gortex shell, along with insulated ski gloves, two layers of wool socks, a face mask, my insulated hiking boots, and gaiters. This is pretty much the same gear that I've worn climbing in Adirondack blizzards. We're on our way at 11:15 PM.

Day 7: The Push to the Summit, or, Is This Really What the F**k We Signed on to?

We weren't the first to leave and we weren't the last. Abdi and Moody (plus two porters) wanted us on the trail early, again not to be caught in the crowd leaving camp. Here it was, the final push up to the summit. I was at the rear and pleasantly distracted following Sarita's lower torso in the light of my headlamp. And so we climbed, a trail of bobbing head-lamps that twisted and turned up the mountain, nothing but the stars to ground us as we wove our way around rocks and boulders, always the light at the feet in front of us. It was relentless.

At some point I realized my right eye seemed to be out of sorts. I was itching and rubbing it, but I assumed it was just the cold and the wind. Each of us was digging deep into reserves that we didn't know we had. My mind wandered among so many past challenges (such as building my house, climbing in the Adirondacks, and doing triathlons), and still it was step after step, relentless steps, one after another, why the f**k am I here, our breaks were sparse and limited, po-le po-le became the mantra, every breath an exertion, every step a step closer.

My eyes had clouded over in the darkness, and I didn't realize what was happening. At 5:30 AM, we were finally at one of our stopping places, Stella Point (elev. 18,848 feet), with less than a half-mile to go to the summit. The wind became even more of an adversary; standing like sails against the force, we pushed our way forward along a glacier, relieved that the trail was flatter and that we were on our way to Uhuru Peak. The sun arrived to guide our final steps. I look and feel like s**t, hell warmed over. But then, with my sight severely clouded but no pain, I reached the summit! I'm guessing I had about 50 percent clarity of vision. It had been like driving in thick fog, but walking.



At this point, 40 to 50 other people were waiting to have their pictures taken. Fortunately, Abdi and Moody managed to get us to the head of the queue, and we had our individual and group photos taken. I told Moody that I couldn't see very well. He looked at my eyes, asked me a few questions, grabbed Lema (one of the porters), and told him to get me back down the mountain to the camp as quickly as possible.

Holding my arm, Lema guided me back down the trail past the line of people heading for the peak. At this point I realized there was some urgency to my situation. Fortunately, we switched to a different trail that was less arduous. Still, it was

slow going in places, including some slipping and sliding on a long section of "scree," the rock fragments that accumulate at the base of cliffs and mountainsides. Moving through the scree was like sliding down a large sand dune.

In other areas, along ledges and big steps, Lema had to help me down because I had little to no depth perception. Although the camp was only about 2.5 miles away, it took over 4 hours to get there. I was then told that I had HAR (high altitude retinopathy); basically, my eyes didn't like the extra-high altitude and were unable to acclimate quickly enough to the change in pressure, lower level of oxygen, and strenuous activity.

We were all back at the camp before 11 AM, had another meal, and were told to rest for a couple of hours. I slept, hoping that this would help to clear the fog but woke to find that I still had my foggy condition. At this point, Moody and Abdi told us that we all needed to head down the mountain to a much lower elevation. This would be the best treatment for my eyes. And so, we were off again, heading down the trail to Mweka Huts Camp (elev. 10,190 feet) on the edge of the cloud forest.

Progress was slow at first given the occasional steps down and the unevenness of the trail, but slowly it became much easier to navigate. Gradually, we had fewer stumbles and slips and we made the 4.5 miles in less than 4 hours. Camp had already been pitched, and we were in time for a short break before dinner.

As you might imagine, all four of us were exhausted after being on the trail for at least 16 hours. It didn't take long for us to eat and crawl into our sleeping bags. I slept like a log and was most thankful when I woke in the morning to find my sight had cleared and was fogless. There were sighs of relief among my three companions, as well as Moody and Abdi. Unfortunately, due to the impaired eyesight the previous day, I hadn't gotten any photos of our descent on Day 7.

Day 8: Happy to See Again

Once again, we're up early and on the trail heading for Mweka Gate, about 5.5 miles away. We were soon in the cloud forest, where the area was thick with vegetation, misty and foggy, with massive trees, large tree ferns, and bright yellow, orange, and red flowers of all shapes and sizes. The trail was no longer rocky, and there were no boulders, only slick dirt that was seriously slippery in places. We finally make it to the gate before noon, and it takes a while to get checked out of the park. As we sat and waited, a local entrepreneur came along and offered to wash our boots— which were a wretched mess— for a couple of dollars. We accepted without hesitation. Shortly thereafter, we loaded onto the bus and headed out the gate back to Moshi.



We were tired but elated that we had all made it, even amid apprehensions, fears, and a multitude of challenges, both personal and on the trail. It was a phenomenal feeling to have climbed the highest mountain in Africa with good friends, new and old.

Wrapping Up the Triumphant Climb

To close the story, I reached out to each of my companions to get their thoughts on the trip. According to Keith, who worked for one of my former clients, "Climbing Kilimanjaro provided a challenge that I needed at this time of my life. It cemented friendships and showed how we supported each other along the way. It changed my life path moving forward." Keith continues to work closely with Dave (now with Global Tech) on a large wastewater project in Florida.

Dave captured his feelings, and all of ours, with the following: "It was a hard and beautiful journey that required a significant amount of dedication from each of us. Summit night was one of the hardest things I've ever done. Completing the trip with two good friends made the experience even better. Lots of laughs and good times. Can't wait for the next one."

Sarita, who travels and hikes a great deal, shared these thoughts: "I had read about the trip and thought it was completely out of my comfort zone. I booked the trip anyway, traveling alone, with the encouragement of a younger friend who had done it. Totally by coincidence, I ended up with three American guys who were doing the same route. It was interesting being the only female, but before long we were getting on so well, chatting away, having laughs, and all motivating each other as things got tougher along the way. We developed a lovely bond.

"The summit night was very difficult; we walked for hours in the cold and wind. We were so tired, but we kept pushing on, supporting each other, po-le, po-le, and remarkably, there we were at the summit as the sun was coming up. Our emotions were flying, and we were overjoyed at reaching Uhuru. It was a fantastic experience. I still look back and wonder how I completed it. I was fortunate to be with an amazing team that definitely helped achieve our goal. I will cherish these memories forever, as well as the friendship and camaraderie of it all."

So, there you have it, after months of working out and preparing for this trip, through all the obstacles, the challenges, and the struggles we each had in reaching the summit of Kilimanjaro, we've come away with a lifetime of memories collected over 8 days.

After all this, I've asked myself one question: "If I had known that night while climbing toward Uhuru Peak that I had eye problems, would I have pushed on or stopped and gone back to the camp?" The wise thing to do would have been to turn back, but...well, I'll never know what I would have done. A week later I celebrated my 70th birthday. Not too bad, given that less than 2% of the people who climb Kilimanjaro are over 70.

Upon returning to the States, I visited with my ophthalmologist and then a retinologist to evaluate my eyes. Fortunately, no long-term eye damage had occurred. That said, I'm avoiding climbing above 15,000 feet in the future.

One final observation about this adventure. I'd met Keith as a client about 30 years ago, and Dave continues to work with Keith. Many years ago, Jim Howland and others, such as Dick Bedard and Fred Eidsness, taught that our clients are king or queen. And that it was important to do outstanding work on their behalf to keep them in our camp and if possible, become their friends. No truer words have been spoken, as I re-discovered on this rugged trail in Tanzania.

SNIPPETS ON THE LEGACY OF DR. FRED EIDSNESS (1913-2003)

By Bob Forbes, with Eric Eidsness and Dick Bedard (RHforbesjr@gmail.com, heidsness@earthlink.net, rbedard54@gmail.com)



Dr. Fred Eidsness was one of the three founders of the Florida-based consulting firm Black, Crow & Eidsness (BC&E), which was acquired by CH2M HILL in 1977. Many CHAA members recall “Dr. Fred” as an unforgettable man, known by his colorful personality and big, black patch over one eye.

Here are a few tidbits from the life and times of Dr. Fred, aka “Big Fred,” aka “Ole One-Eye.” His son, Eric Eidsness, and colleague, Dick Bedard, are primary sources of information, along with my memories of him from working in Florida in the 1980s and the stories I heard.

The Early Years

Fred’s potential appeared early in life when he became the nation’s youngest Eagle Scout at the time. Later, he entered medical school but had to drop out after his father, M. L. Eidsness, was laid off from the U.S. Postal Service. Incidentally, his father created the very popular “First Day Issue” stamp concept while employed at the USPS.

Fred entered William and Mary College, where he earned both BS and MS degrees in Biology. Not content to be just a scientist, Fred produced, directed, and starred in musicals while in college, where he also met and courted his one and only wife, Judy. After college he made use of his technical skills and effervescent personality to become a top salesman for Infilco-Degremont, Inc. (IDI), a global manufacturer of water and wastewater treatment equipment.

Creating a Powerhouse

In 1951 Fred, Bill Crow, and Dr. A.P. (Doc) Black co-founded BC&E, which became a powerhouse water engineering company in Florida and the Southeast. In the beginning, Doc Black was chief scientist of the company, Bill Crow managed engineering, administration, and finance, and Fred was the head of technology and marketing. Due in large part to Fred’s role as BC&E’s consummate salesman, the firm’s geographic reach expanded as far south as Cuba and as far north as Dayton, Ohio. In 1957, he earned a PhD in chemistry at the University of Florida and from then on became known as “Dr. Fred.”



Thanks to Dr. Fred’s international contacts from his days at IDI, BC&E did some work in Cuba prior to the fall of the Batista regime in 1959. Many talented Cuban engineers fled the country when Castro’s Communist party took over, and Dr. Fred recruited several of them to BC&E.

This photo, taken about 1957, shows Dr. Fred, two colleagues, and a Florida client starting a business trip to Cuba. The men, from left to right, are John R. Kelley (Gainesville, Florida Utilities Director), Dr. Fred, Charlie Black (BC&E head of public relations and son of Doc Black), and Doc Black. The train left the Waldo Station in Florida, bound for Miami. From there, the travelers flew on to Cuba.

As a young engineer in CH2M HILL’s Gainesville office in the 1980s, I received outstanding technical guidance from two of his Cuban recruits, Manuel Carreno, and Manuel Vilaret. Another one of his top Cuban recruits, Dr. Ignacio Garcia-Bengochea (who passed away in 2023), developed the concept of deep-well injection of wastewater effluent to improve and preserve surface water quality in South Florida.

The Stuff of Legend

Many stories have been told about Dr. Fred. He was a flashy dresser with a brash and over-confident demeanor that could initially put off some clients. BC&E's first interview in South Carolina was in the late 1960s and would involve BC&E in the creation of the Grand Strand Water & Sewer Authority (WSA). Bob Ghiotto cautioned Dr. Fred about his language, as one member of the Authority was a Baptist minister who, coincidentally had also lost an eye. As members of the WSA deliberated among themselves after the presentation, Dr. Fred overheard the minister grumbling to his colleagues about "that loud-talking, Cadillac-driving, Florida salesman in his \$500 suit," to which Dr. Fred immediately retorted, "That just goes to show that you can't believe ANY one-eyed son-of-a-bitch!" The Baptist minister almost fell out of his chair laughing, BC&E won the job, and the Grand Strand WSA became a client of BC&E and CH2M HILL for years afterward.

An interview for another client started about an hour behind schedule one long evening, partially due to long and fancy presentations during preceding interviews by BC&E's competitors. Sensing that most folks in the room were ready to go home, Dr. Fred gave perhaps his shortest presentation ever, saying, "We don't have a movie; I didn't bring a brochure or pretty pictures; if you want to know how good we are, don't ask me because I'll lie. Ask our clients, and here is a list of their names and phone numbers. END OF PRESENTATION!" BC&E won the project in a unanimous vote.

Dr. Fred had lost his right eye in 1962 as an unplanned consequence of two operations to remove sinus cancer. The real story about his eye patch is the courage Dr. Fred showed in adapting his life to having just one eye. As son Eric recalls, "He continued to play golf, fish, and never complained about it that I ever heard. At least outwardly, he showed little sign that it handicapped him in any way. It did, of course, but he always covered his discomfort with humor."

Dr. Fred understood water science at the molecular level and held several patents. He also received highest awards from the Water Pollution Control Federation, the American Water Works Association, and the International Water Association. Less than a year after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) founding in 1970, Dr. Fred wrote a newspaper article criticizing the Nixon Administration's choices for its political appointees to the EPA, arguing that EPA administrators should be experts with scientific and engineering backgrounds, rather than lawyers as most of them were. He was not afraid to express his controversial opinions, which endeared him to many BC&E clients.

I once managed an engineering study for the Village of Palm Springs (Florida) Water Treatment Plant. My role involved herding an assortment of CH2M HILL cats to evaluate the whole facility and report our recommendations. One "ole tomcat" who showed up to our site visit by surprise was Dr. Fred himself, a long-time friend of the client. They were having problems with the facility's chlorination system, a vendor package that they could not get to operate as intended. I watched as Dr. Fred took no more than a 5-second look at the control panel; then I heard him growl, "Shut the son-of-a-bitch down, it'll never work!" This saved the client several thousand dollars by deleting it from our evaluation. Instead, we covered it in one sentence: "The facility's disinfection system needs to be replaced in its entirety." Dr. Fred's snap judgments like this one were always on target and endeared him to so many clients. As a bonus in this case, we got to follow our report with the design of major renovations and improvements to the facility.

Dr. Fred was also proud of his son, Frederic Jr., who rose quickly through EPA's ranks. When Junior met with local officials he was often greeted with, "Dr. Eidsness, I thought you were a much older man with an eye patch!" Thus, Freddy dropped the Fred from his name and became Eric Eidsness to distinguish himself from his famous father. Eric learned and adopted Big Fred's view of the federal government, usually expressed as, "They have all the answers but don't know the questions."

Role in CH2M HILL Expansion

In the mid-1970s, Dr. Fred initiated the deal for CH2M HILL to acquire BC&E from Hercules Chemical Company. A few years earlier, Hercules had acquired BC&E to diversify its holdings but concluded after owning BC&E for several years that it was not a good fit. As a result, they looked for opportunities to divest themselves of BC&E. Dr. Fred started negotiations by ringing up Holly Cornell out of the blue and asking him, "Hey, do you want to buy a great engineering company on the cheap?" Thus started the deal that closed in 1977 and completed CH2M HILL's nationwide presence.

Dick Bedard joined CH2M HILL in 1981 to lead its Southeast Florida business, and his office in Boca Raton was next to Dr. Fred's office. Dick soon realized being near Dr. Fred was akin to getting a PhD in Florida engineering and politics. Dr. Fred knew where the bodies were buried, partly because he had buried many of them! He was fully retired by then but still showed up most days to coach Dick and his colleagues as they navigated the Southeast Florida engineering market. One of his favorite sayings was "Bedard, they're all IDIOTS." If you haven't surmised it by now, Dr. Fred could be a bit opinionated.



About the same time, I was working out of our Boca Raton office and heard Dr. Fred's booming, uncensored voice as he was talking on the phone. A colleague quickly warned me, "What you overhear from Dr. Fred needs to stay right here." Then there was The Sailfish. Dr. Fred had once caught a beautiful sailfish and proudly mounted it on his office wall. That fish had at least nine lives. Over the years, it was dropped, banged around, and bruised numerous times. And every time, it was fixed at CH2M HILL's expense. So, here's a belated thanks to you, members of the CHAA, for saving Dr. Fred's Sailfish.

May The Sailfish and Dr. Fred continue to fight it out in the afterlife!

If you'd like to read more stories of Fred's wild sense of humor, business savvy, antics, gruff charm, and overall politically incorrect approach to dealing with people, [click on this link: _____](#). Notice: some of the stories include crude and potentially offensive language used by Fred.