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AT THE TOP OF THE CLASS

Four locals, including a teacher, return from Kilimanjaro

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SOUTHLAKE -- How do you celebrate reaching the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro?

If you are a couple of climbers from Northeast Tarrant County, you drop and do a few push-ups.

Four area climbers who were in a group of 10 Americans that took on Africa's highest peak have returned with mementos and an abundance of stories.

Kathy Loewen, 43, a teacher at Eubanks Intermediate School in the Carroll district, plans to return to her classroom today. Students, who have followed the trip up the 19,340-foot mountain through e-mail, are eager for more details, school officials said.

The climbers' seven-hour push to the summit Feb. 3 began at 4:30 a.m. and continued through a snowy "white-out." During the demanding trek, some climbers felt the effects of the altitude, with nausea and headaches. When they reached the top about 1:30 p.m., the Texans tried to use their satellite phone but couldn't get a signal.

"It was just 'follow the person in front of you,'" said Loewen of Grapevine. "We didn't get the beautiful vistas that other people get."

During the trip, communication with the school was hampered by rain clouds. The group had counted on a solar panel to power a laptop and handheld satellite phone used to send messages to the students, said climber Rick Fogle, 56, of Colleyville.

"It was a good idea, but there was no sunlight," he said. "It rained on us and rained and rained, and we would get little tidbits of sunlight, and we would deplete the battery."

The group included Fogle, Loewen, Cindy Lee of Southlake and Jim Rubalcaba of Lewisville. They're members of the Lake Grapevine Runners and Walkers. Four climbers from Dallas and two from California joined them.

Loewen has made prints of her digital photos showing porters and guides, lush rainforest and a visit to a school. Pupils there were excited to learn that they would receive school supplies donated by Eubanks students, she said.

One photo is of a sixth-grade classroom, with wooden benches and tables and bare walls. Loewen, who teaches sixth-grade math, will show it to her students. She said her classroom has a television and three computers.

The Eubanks students, who had learned about mountaineering before the trip, tracked the ascent foot by foot. The adventure offered lessons in many areas, including math, technology and community service, Eubanks Principal Mark Terry said.

The students were amazed when the group used two 9-volt batteries and a backpacking knife to create power to send an e-mail. That helped illustrate a science lesson, Terry said.

"It ties right into our electricity unit," he said. "It brings a lot of stuff down to life -- this really does work. It makes it all real."

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IN THE KNOW

The trip

Plane ride: Dallas to Minneapolis to Amsterdam to Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, to Kilimanjaro.

Time difference: nine hours

Water consumption: 3 to 7 liters per day

Showers: On Jan. 25 and Feb. 6

The climb: Ascent in seven days, descent in two days

Mount Kilimanjaro: Africa's tallest mountain at 19,340 feet, in northeastern Tanzania, in eastern Africa

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