A different kind of mountain
Cancer survivor likens recovery to mountain expedition

By Russ Zabel
Queen Anne/Magnolia News

Matthew Fioretti had it all going for him. His business, Four Winds Imports on Queen Anne Hill, was doing well, and so was his Four Winds Himalaya Guide Service, which had been mounting two climbing expeditions a year to the world's tallest mountain range.

But fate took a potentially deadly turn in August 2004 when he was diagnosed with aplastic anemia, a form of cancer that shut down his blood production. That meant his oxygen levels were also shot, a condition he compared to being at a 23,500-foot level on a climb.

“At first, I couldn’t believe it because I was in really good shape,” he said. Fioretti’s state of mind suffered, as well. “I had the poor-me attitude.”

Figuring that he probably wouldn’t survive the disease with that kind of thinking, Fioretti said he developed a positive attitude and started meditating.

He was also getting blood transfusions as part of his treatment. “I went a year liv-
Survivor: 'Hardest climb of my life'

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Matthew Fioretti digs into the side of a mountain on one of his Four Winds expeditions. Fioretti survived a bout with cancer thanks to a marrow donor in Italy.

Realizing he came from an Italian family background, someone at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance got the bright idea of checking the registry in Italy and found two matches for him. Fioretti smiled.

The bone marrow was harvested in Italy and flown to the University of Washington Medical Center, where Fioretti was already receiving chemo treatments in preparation for the transplant, he said.

Fioretti got the bone-marrow transplant on Oct. 4, 2005. “Within five days I was producing my own blood again,” he said. His prognosis is good. The disease stays in remission for 99 percent of those who receive the transplant, Fioretti said.

Still, it was a tough go. Fioretti likened his battle against aplastic anemia to a mountain-climbing expedition.

“It was the hardest climb of my life.” It was also one of the most expensive.

Even with insurance, Fioretti was saddled with $90,000 in medical bills, he said.

Fioretti is helping spread the work about donor registries, too. He gave a talk about that and presented a slide show of his Himalayan tours at REI’s flagship store on June 19.

Two people signed up for a trek, but 28 signed up to be on the bone-marrow register, the cancer survivor said. All it takes to be on the register is a cheek swab, he added.