

Local Mountaineer Survives His Toughest Climb Yet

Climber Matt Fioretti battled a rare disease and won, with a bone marrow transplant and a new outlook on life.

by Randy Woods
Editor

Matt Fioretti, who has run his Four Winds mountain guide service and home decor boutique for 18 years atop Queen Anne hill, is practically a poster child for healthy living. As a guide specializing in Himalayan expeditions, he has a lean, lithe frame honed to endure the extremes of high-altitude climbing and the calm, pleasant demeanor that reflects his Buddhist beliefs.

Just a few years ago, Fioretti barely resembled the strong, confident alpine specialist he is today. In 2004, he was stricken down by a rare blood disease that required every ounce of his strength to keep on living. With the help of the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and the Bone Marrow Foundation, he has managed to make his toughest climb yet — the fight against his own rogue and damaged immune system.

Finding his path

Matt Fioretti has always been fascinated by tall mountains and nature, and started climbing when he was 18. “I cut my

teeth the North Cascades doing alpine climbing,” he said, and eventually climbed mounts Rainier, Baker, Shuksan, Stewart, Olympus and many others in the Cascade and Olympic ranges.

“Climbing is definitely a spiritual adventure,” he said. “You are always definitely in the moment. It fits in with such a lot of teaching in Buddhism. It’s never about the adrenaline thing.”

His true goal, however, was the lofty, 20,000-plus-foot Himalayan region of Nepal and Tibet. After making his first trip to the Himalayan summit of Naya Kanga in 1992, he never turned back. “I had a connection with the people there and decided to center my life around it,” he said.

After taking some ropes, wilderness and first aid courses, he started Four Winds when he was 27 and began guiding two small tours per year in 1994, specializing on the less-popular peaks, such as Pumori, Kyajo Ri and Manaslu. His highest peak so far is Cho Oyu at 26,905 feet, the world’s sixth tallest. With four Sherpa guides under his employ in Kathmandu, Fioretti is already booked out through next year.

Troubles begin

In August 2004, after summiting a Nepalese peak called Nirekha that had never been climbed before, Fioretti still felt like he had no oxygen, even back at sea level. “It was like my body was stuck at altitude,” he said. “I didn’t know what else it could be. I figured it was just some passing illness, like the flu.”

When it got so bad he had to use a cane to stay upright, he went to his doctor, who discovered it was a rare blood disease called aplastic anemia, which damages bone marrow and reduces its ability to produce blood cells and platelets.

The low-end normal for platelet count in the bloodstream is

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Fioretti's Four Winds boutique has supplied sustainable home decor with a Himalayan theme for the last 18 years on Queen Anne Avenue. Photo by Randy Woods



Seen here in his element, Fioretti climbs a wall of rock and ice at 18,000 feet on a peak called Nirekha, which he was the first to ever summit. Photo courtesy of Matt Fioretti



Matt Fioretti in his shop. "I appreciated the irony that I spent so much time at high altitude and then got a disease that takes away your ability to get oxygen. But one of the gifts this illness gave me was spiritual strength. I've accepted that this is my life now. I feel that I climb better and stronger."
Photo by Randy Woods



Fioretti is silhouetted in front of Nepal's Nuptse peak while at Camp I during an expedition to the 23,494-foot peak of Pumori. He said his long struggle with his illness has taught him not to fear death but to accept it as a natural step in life's journey — "maybe one of the greatest steps of all," he added.

Photo courtesy of Matt Fioretti

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about 150,000 per microliter. On his first visit, Fioretti's count was just 14,000. In effect, his blood struggled to supply him with less than a tenth of the oxygen he needed.

Immediately he was told: "Go to the emergency room."

"I just thought he was nuts," Fioretti recalled. "One minute I was climbing the highest peaks in the world, and the next I was struggling for my life? It didn't make any sense."

Running out of rope

A bone biopsy, however, performed at Seattle's Polyclinic confirmed the worst. "It turns out I had virtually no new blood being produced," Fioretti said. "Whatever cells were produced kept dying. I was living off of blood transfusions."

Aplastic anemia is in its own category but it's often treated the same way as blood cancers, with chemotherapy and immune suppression drugs. For more than a year the Polyclinic doctors tried several different therapies, all of which failed to

restore any white or red cell generation. After 68 blood transfusions, the only option was a risky bone marrow transplant.

By the time he made it to the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, Fioretti's platelet count had dropped to an astonishingly low 1,000 per microliter. It was September 2005, just 13 months since he had first felt symptoms. After three days of searching the registry of bone marrow donors, no matches were found.

"I was preparing myself for the worst," he recalled. "It was a real test of my Buddhist belief in truly living in the moment. I had to learn how to let go of my fears and accept death as something positive — just another step on my journey."

Establishing a toehold

A few days later, with no more options left, one of the Cancer Care Alliance researchers asked Fioretti about his name. Was that several generations removed from Italy? "I told him, 'No, my parents were first-generation from Italy.'"

It was the break they desperately needed. By expanding the search to the Italian bone marrow database, the Alliance found not just one but two donor matches, one of which had 9 of the 10 possible matching characteristics.

Quickly, the doctors wiped out his immune system with cytotoxic and other chemotherapy drugs in preparation for the new marrow, which was flown in from Italy on Oct. 4, 2005. For the next 31 days, Fioretti says, his own body battled the newly introduced marrow and immune system. "It's like a war zone inside the body," he says.

87

The total number of blood transfusions Fioretti received during his five-year, near-fatal illness.



Fioretti seen climbing Nepal's Pumori peak before he was stricken with aplastic anemia, which nearly took his life.

Photo courtesy of Matt Fioretti

Nice view from the top

After many tense months, and a scary near-rejection of the marrow graft in 2006, the platelet counts gradually began rising on their own by 2007 and kept improving for two more years.

By April 2009, Fioretti said he finally felt "normal," and began easing back into his mountain guide career, slowly building back his atrophied connective tissue and weakened muscles.

Today, after 28 rounds of chemo and 87 blood transfusions, Fioretti is back leading two Himalayan expeditions a year. "I feel that I climb better and stronger," he said. "The little things I used to get upset about don't bother me as much."

"I can't say I've seen any other transplant survivor who has done as well as Matt has," said Dr. Michael Linenberger, who treated Fioretti at the Cancer Care Alliance.

During his recovery, Fioretti found this quote that helped inspire him: "Remember to intentionally tweak your world once in a while, get out of your comfort zone; it is here where the most growth occurs. Full on security is the denial of life."

On a recent trip to a peak called Ama Dablam, he placed his ID card from the Cancer Care Alliance at the 22,467-foot summit; one more worldly possession he no longer needs.

Last-Minute Lifeline

For those waiting for a transplant, the work done by local and national nonprofits can mean life or death.

Not a moment to spare

When Matt Fioretti was lying in the hospital, waiting for a potential bone marrow transplant donor, he was essentially waiting to find out if he lived or died. The arithmetic is brutally clear — patients' chances of success depended on how broad the donor list was. The more people on the list, the greater the chance of finding a match.

Interested in registering/donating?

Fortunately, those who wish to be counted as potential donors can do so with very little pain. While there is some risk involved, as with all medical procedures, registering or donating bone marrow is an easy process:

- **National Marrow Donor Program (marrow.org).**

Nonprofit that maintains The Match Registry, the world's largest database of potential donors. Call 800-627-7692.

- **Seattle Cancer Care Alliance (seattlecca.org).** A

collaboration between the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, UW Medicine and Seattle Children's Hospital. Call 855-557-0555.

- **The Bone Marrow Foundation (bonemarrow.org).**

Offers financial assistance and free support services to bone marrow/stem cell transplant patients and their families. Call 800-365-1336.



The Seattle Cancer Care Alliance was able to find Matt a bone marrow match against all odds in 2007. He responded in kind, getting back on his feet within months. By 2009, he was back climbing the Himalayas.

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