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Climb has cadet's head in clouds

Mashaeh Saleh says her 10-day Mount Everest trek has helped prepared her for life's challenges

By PATRICIA BROOKS ARENBURG Staff Reporter



Mashaeh Saleh, a Grade 12 student at Dartmouth High and a cadet with the Halifax Rifles Cadet Corps, climbed to the base camp of Mount Everest in November. She says the experiences she's had as a cadet will help her in her goal of becoming a doctor. (Staff)

Mashaeh Saleh could barely believe her eyes. After 10 days of climbing, she and a group of army cadets from all across Canada had made it to the base camp of Mount Everest.

"It seems like a dream now," the 17-year-old said in an interview from her Dartmouth home.

The group had been climbing since 4 a.m. that day and had already broken the national cadet altitude record on the summit of Kala Pattar before heading to Everest.

She was amazed by what she saw — rocks and boulders everywhere — and also by what she didn't see.

"You can't see Everest," she said. "It's hidden completely by the mountains in front of it, so that was a little weird." It was the trip of a lifetime. And she got paid to go: \$120, plus expenses, and \$200 in spending money.

Mashaeh, a Jordanian immigrant, joined the Halifax Rifles Cadet Corps when she was 12. She spends her Monday nights at the Halifax Armouries for regular cadet meetings and Wednesday nights doing cadet biathlon training.

Every summer, she gets paid to go away on cadet programs where she learns leadership and many other skills. Last year, she spent six weeks in Banff, Alta., earning awards as the top female cadet and top female athlete.

"A lot of people say it's like Canada's best kept secret," she said of cadets. "No one knows that you can do all of this stuff for free."

In March, her commanding officer encouraged her to apply for an international senior cadet expedition. She sent in an application and forgot about it until June when she received an acceptance letter.

A cadet exchange to the U.K. left her with little time over the summer to prepare for the trek in October. But when she got home, Mashaeh hit the gym after school, lifting weights and running for

half an hour every day.

On Oct. 8, she travelled to Toronto to join other cadets, get her gear, learn about Nepalese culture and undergo fitness testing.

Once in Nepal, the 14 cadets and four officers spent a couple of days mountain biking, touring Kathmandu and getting organized.

The group then set out with Sherpas from Lukla, a town in northeast Nepal, hiking in the mountains for over two weeks, from early in the morning until late afternoon. They slept mostly in tents and ate meals prepared by the Sherpas.

Even for a young athlete like Mashaël, the climb was a tremendous challenge. The higher she got, the worse it felt.

"It felt like you were running while you were walking. You're moving slowly but your heart's going boom, boom, boom, boom."

As they hiked across glaciers and above the clouds, their guide told them to breathe deeply and pace themselves. They took a big step and a small step, followed by another big step and so on.

"Just focusing on the stepping made me forget about my breathing," she said.

Altitude sickness forced one male cadet to turn back almost halfway up their record-breaking 5,545-metre climb of Kala Pattar.

When the rest of the group got to the summit, "magically, for like half an hour, all the clouds went away and you could see Everest . . . and all the mountains around, and you could see the tiny little village (from) where we started," Mashaël said.

The group got out Canadian flags and started to record the moment on camera. After a tea break, they set out for Everest.

"Today was definitely the most fighting I've had to do mentally," Mashaël wrote on the cadet website. "In the end, we arrived here at Everest Base Camp, and the pain, discomfort, and fatigue all just added to the whole experience. We set a new Cadet Altitude record, but it was NOT easy! Go Team Canada!!!"

The group continued hiking for several more days. Their energy and breathing improved with each step down, she said.

Coming home on Nov. 2 was a bit of a downer for Mashaël. Even though the Grade 12 student missed almost a month of classes at Dartmouth High School, most of her teachers were excited for her, she said. And, she said, her friends outside cadets were finally convinced that she hadn't been pulling their leg with her pre-trip talk.

Mashaël doesn't know if she can top her Mount Everest trek, but she has other mountains to climb. She wants to go to McGill University to become a doctor through the Canadian Forces' medical officer training program and eventually work with Doctors Without Borders. And she credits the army cadets with helping her set her sights high.

"You get offered opportunities that no one else you know will have. It changes who you are for the better," she said.