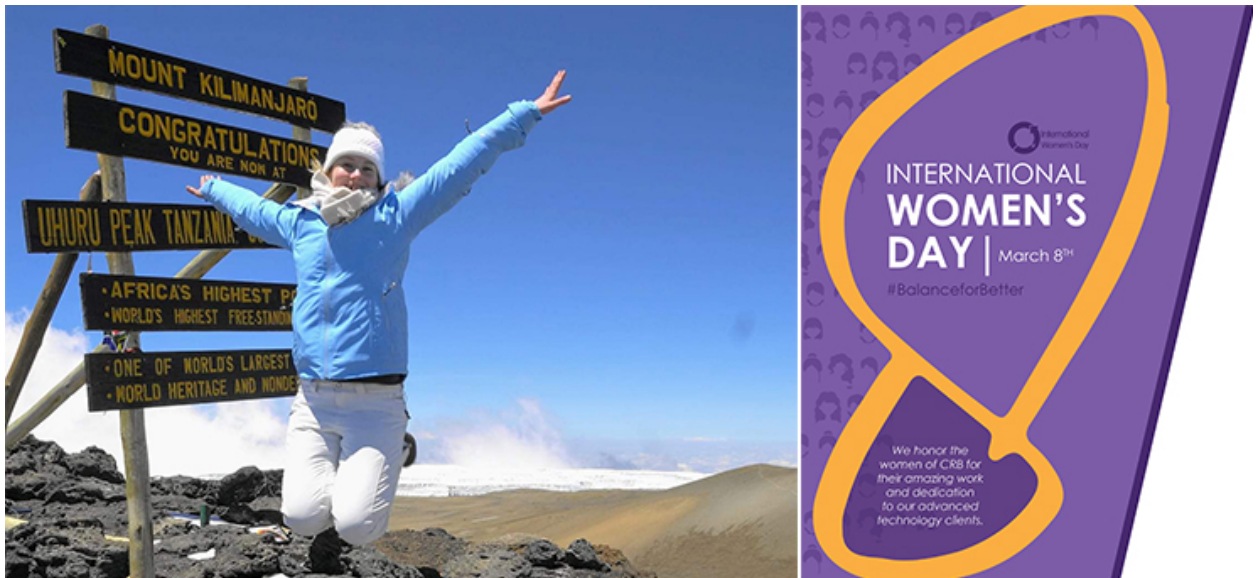


- Happy International Women's Day. Girls can do anything!

Friday, March 8, 2019



What Kilimanjaro taught me

"I am going to climb Kilimanjaro in three months." This is how it started back in November 2018. The tallest free-standing mountain in the world that towers at 5895 meters (19,341 feet). A mix of surprise, doubt and silence were among people's reactions. This blondie—too fragile—who feels cold during summer, with zero hiking experience.

Some people said, "She will never make it. She should postpone, try something else." With the lack of experience and three months' notice to get ready, they could have been right, but my desire to tackle this challenge was much stronger—maybe a bit of foolishness and pride.

Other people became a real source of motivation and positivity. Whether they adapted their schedule to allow me to go, gave advice on how to prepare, trained with me or wrote letters for the hike, they all started showing an incredible support in their own way.

This would be one of the biggest and hardest adventures in my life. I knew it, but if I wanted to make it, I had to leave doubts, uncertainties and people's judgments behind me and just go for it!

It was meant to be a nine-day hike with 17 crew members for five climbers. For some reason, the remaining four climbers had to cancel the trip at the last minute. I ended up being the only climber among those 17 male porters who (and it says everything) would later be calling me

"dada" ("sister" in Swahili).

To say that this experience was life-changing is a huge understatement.



We started the adventure in the jungle, surrounded by blue and white colobus monkeys jumping around from tree to tree.

At Lava Tower Camp (4630 meters, 15,190 feet), where climbers usually start experiencing altitude sickness (nausea, headache), I was feeling pretty good, but instead of enjoying it, I was waiting for a sign of altitude sickness to confirm that what people were telling me before was true—that the only way to make it to the top was to struggle. Then my guide Shedrack said, "What's wrong with you?! Everyone's body reacts differently. You might be stronger than you think, my friend. Just embrace it and stop overthinking." And nothing happened. He was right.

At 2 a.m. I woke up, went outside my frozen tent in the cold, thin air, sat alone on a rock and stargazed among those billion stars in the darkness. Contemplating the greatness of the universe. I have never felt more alive than in this moment.





At Arrow Glacier Camp (5470 meters, 17,950 feet), we were even dancing, singing, enjoying life and the wonders around us.



Then I experienced probably the hardest night of my life so far: crossing the Western Breach. It is known as the most technically challenging and dangerous route to Kilimanjaro's summit due to its steep and rocky slopes. The ascent is performed overnight, when rocks are still frozen, to mitigate the risk of rockfalls. I was not fully aware of what it meant until I got there and had the good idea to look down the 2000-foot steep slope with my headlamp.

The landscape was pure beauty and so frightening at the same time. The icy (and slippery) rocks were sparkling like diamonds under our feet. The snow, all the way down, was shining in between the two massive dark sides of the mountain. Throughout the night, all I could hear was the frozen wind blowing and my heart beating so fast to compensate for the lack of oxygen. It was a feeling of isolation and humility that you cannot forget.

In the middle of the first rim, I found myself paralyzed by fear, breaking down into tears and trying to breathe at the same time—so close to the top and still so far away. Because of exhaustion, negative thoughts hit me. I was so silly to tackle such a crazy challenge and would probably end up dying on this mountain. I will never make it. But Shedrack—the most encouraging and selfless human—reminded me to think positive, to focus my energy on the people who believe in me and keep going.

Moreover, we had to move forward, as the sun was rising and ice melting around the scrambling rocks. Pole, pole (slowly, slowly), one step after one another, I kept pushing. Then the sun came up. The climb never seemed to end until it did. After six hours of trekking we finally breached the wall and made it into the crater.



It was like opening a door that gives access to another planet. A snowy white landscape surrounded by bright blue glaciers, mind-blowing. It can sound cliché, but the lyrics of the famous Disney song "Let It Go" made total sense in that place.

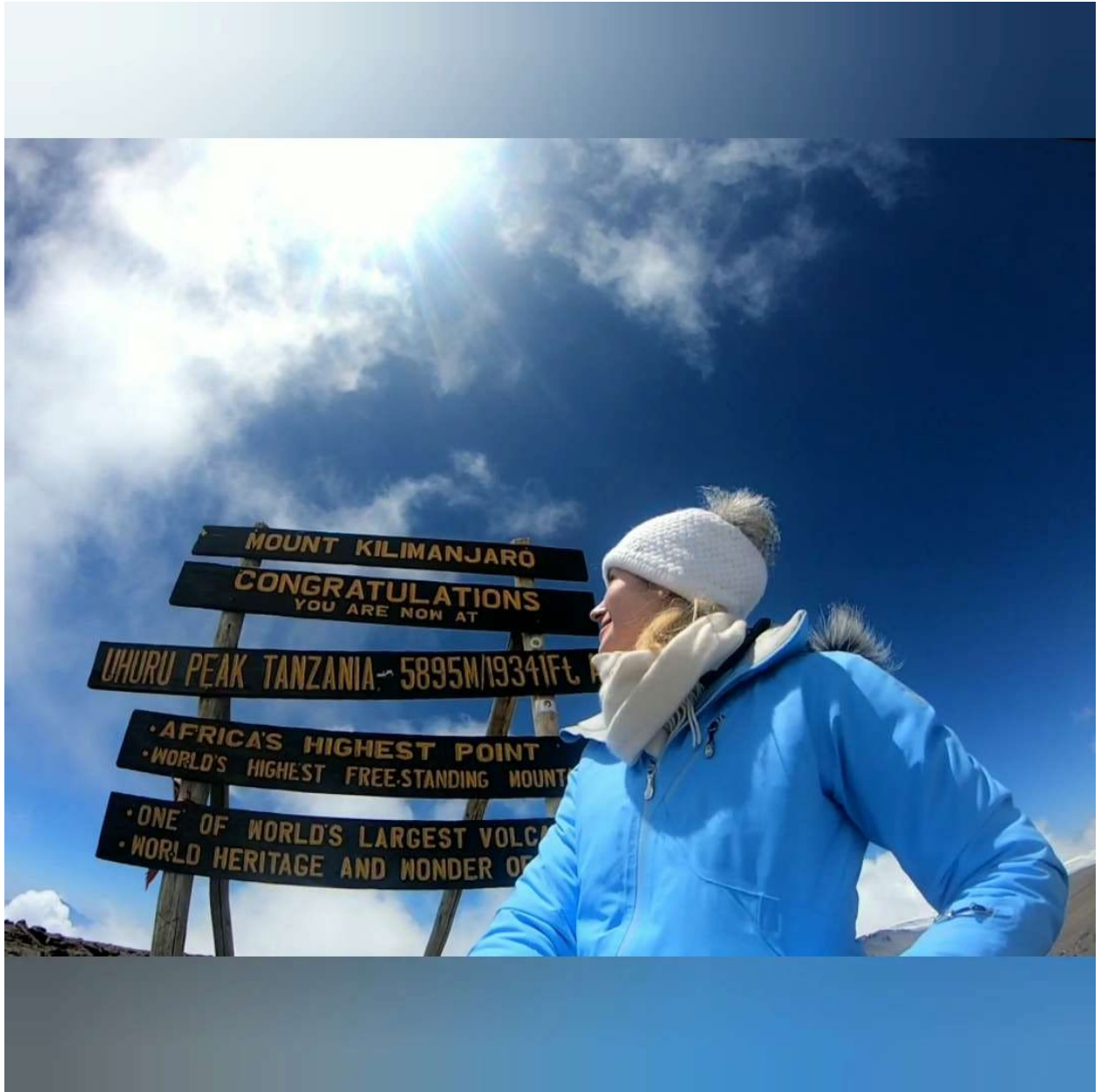




We had lunch and enjoyed a bit of free time. Then, Shedrack came over to ask if I was ready to summit in the afternoon due to my overall good condition. As an answer, I cried—tears of joy, not of sadness—too emotional maybe. “No woman, no cry” would have probably been a better choice for them that day. This precise moment that I had been anticipating for so long was just around the corner. I knew I was going to make it. I was just afraid of succeeding.

By listening all my life to the small percentage of pessimistic judgments and prejudices and not focusing on all the positive ones, I never went beyond my own limits and explored my potential—until that day.

At 1p.m. on February 10, 2019, I was standing at 5895 meters on Uhuru Peak—the rooftop of Africa. “Uhuru” in Swahili means “Freedom.” This is exactly how it felt looking at the horizon, head above the clouds. Those who already summited a mountain will surely relate to this.



How do I express the immense gratitude and respect toward the all the porters, guide, assistant guide, cooking chef ? They were the real heroes and literally cheered me up all the way to the top. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

What this mountain taught me as a woman is that you do not need to justify and prove your value or abilities to others. The only person you have to prove those things to is yourself.

On this International Women's Day, whatever your gender, sex, physical condition or age, nobody can dictate your chances of a success if you want to accomplish something meaningful to you.

Kilimanjaro was my dream. It might not be yours, but you can simply choose whatever makes sense to your own path.

What I can promise: With commitment, work and self-motivation, every human being on this planet, male or female, can achieve anything.

And in case you decide to climb Kilimanjaro, you can do it too!

So If your coworkers, friends, family members or loved ones have a dream, be the first one to surround them with great support and believe in their success. Because at the end, the only thing we'll take away with us are our memories of things we accomplished in life—whether they are big, small, professional or personal.

Happy International Women's Day 2019 :)

Marie Menard, process engineer, Basel, Switzerland